

The Shower List  
By Patrick Carrico

For Lex and Felix

*“Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.”*

— George S. Patton

There had been a brief orientation. Hastily, the mega-shelter tried to force the skeleton crew of new workers to be best friends. Naturally, we sleep-walked through the training, poking at our phones. The first night had come. I felt completely unprepared. My job was to fill buses with homeless people to be driven to an armory on the outskirts of town where an emergency warming shelter had been set up. Human nature, being what it was, had taken hold. An angry mob formed two competing lines for the buses. It began to rain. There was murder in the air. I had a list of names of people on my phone who had done the formal intake process. They were supposed to go first. The rest had promises of shelter beds if there was space. The bus took 23 at a time. There were roughly a hundred gathered before me. The impossibility of the task overwhelmed me. I was going to wait until my coworker arrived to start loading the bus. A riot seemed imminent.

“Do you work here?” an elderly woman asked. A small dog perched on top of her walker.

“Yes, I do,” I said.

“All of these fuckers got here late. The real line is here,” she said pointing at one of the lines.

“Elizabeth, you liar, we have reservations,” someone shouted from another line.

"I'll fuck you up," Elizabeth said to the offending voice. "I'll fuck you up too," she said to me.

"Ok!" I shouted to the crowd. "Who has reservations, we are taking people who did the intake process first."

"We all did," someone shouted.

"I talked to someone on the fucking phone for an hour, I am on that list," someone else shouted.

"Lets see here," I said, stalling, considering the twenty names on the list.  
"Brody!"

After a moment, a stranger came out from one of the lines.

"Here I am."

"OK, hop on," I said. The stranger took a suitcase and lumbered up the steps.

"Did you say Brody? I am Brody," someone else said, charging the first Brody and pulling them down off the steps of the bus by their hood, causing them to fall backwards onto the pavement.

"Hold the hell on," a man said, emerging from the crowd. "Let me see the list." I looked at him, glad to see my coworker. "Hi, I am Chris, let me take a look." Chris lit a cigarette and stared at my phone for a while. By the light of my phone I saw he had a thin and angular face, well kept. He wore carpenter pants. Various tools were strapped to his belt. He smirked. He seemed to inspect the list closely. When he handed me back my phone. I saw he had been looking at my Facebook page.

"Listen up! We have a lot to do tonight and everybody is tired and wet. This bus can take four wheel chairs. I see four wheel chairs, you young lady please board on the lift in the back, your husband can load in the front with your bags. You young man are next and yes I'd like you to board to the back of the bus now, we're going to fill it back to front. I know, I know, we're all going to get there eventually."

All eyes were on Chris as he quickly loaded the first bus and it departed. The tensions between the lines had dissipated. The musky smell of pot and fizz of beers opening filled the air.

"Can you save my spot in line, I have to run to the store," someone said.

"Absolutely," Chris said.

"You think it will be long? I have to run to the store too," someone else said. "One bus, one hundred people, darling you have time," Chris said. "You just have to sound like you know what you're doing," Chris said to me. "Also believe people when they tell you they know what's going on. If you tell them otherwise, they want to fight."

"I used to be a teacher, this is a lot like subbing in a middle school," I said.

"I bet," Chris said.

"I can go last," a young lady said with a sweet smile.

"God bless you, what's your name, Patrick will mark that on the list," Chris said.

"Jessica," she said.

"Ok, do you got that?" Chris said.

"Yes sir," I said, making no note as I was sure I could remember it.

"I did the intake," Jessica assured us.

"I am sure you did. I can see how there is confusion though, people think they did the intake if they talked to someone on the phone. I bet the intake is an actual form or something," Chris said.

"Don't you know?" Jessica asked.

"I work here too and I don't know," I admitted.

"People are cold and scared, it's natural," Chris remarked. The bus had returned. It slid to a stop in front of us. An overwhelmed looking driver gave us a pleading look. Chris smiled. "I am sure no one will mind if this young lady, this young lady and this fine young man go next," Chris said, pointing to some elderly people. There was no complaint. As many had run to the store, the bus filled without incident and pulled away. Chris slapped the back of the bus like a jeep headed to the front as it steamed off into the cold night. "Trust me, you'll hate it up there, there's no reason to hurry," he said, chewing on a cigarette.

"Is there food up there?" Jessica asked. "I have food I was just wondering."

"I really don't know," I said. I had been to the building once. There were pallets of Cup Noodles but I had also noticed a clipboard hanging next to the pallets indicating a Cup Noodle bureaucracy. I was wary of making promises..

"There better be a Thanksgiving day spread up there or I'm going to throw a fit," said Chris.

Eventually the line thinned out. Chris and I got on the last bus with Jessica and a few other stragglers. The air on the bus was heavy and humid. It smelled of a hundred damp coats, malt liquor, and dirt weed. Chris chatted with the driver perched on the edge of his seat staring up the road through the windshield.

"Bet this is first for ya," Chris said.

"Well, yes, yes it is," The driver said. "Man, that was one for the books. So many unhappy people. I would think maybe there'd be some gratitude or something."

"Well, what's that quote from the movie *Office Space*? Something like... every single day of my life has been worse than the day before it. So that means that every single day that you see me, that's the worst day of my life..." Chris said.

"Well, I guess that puts it in perspective, don't it?" the driver admitted.

The armory was alive with action. Shelter guests pushed suitcases to different rooms, couples argued, younger guests chased each other in exaggerated melodrama. Chris and I got cups of coffee in the auditorium. At folding tables sat scores of people. Chris examined military banners on the walls. They held a meaning to him that was foreign to me. I followed Chris as he packed a fresh pack of cigarettes on his arm. He followed other guests out a side door to a designated ‘smoking area’ by several signs listing the rules for smoking. Outside shadowy figures huddled in circles, sneakily smoking pot, and gossiping.

“Fucking place has barbed wire around it. Ain’t that a bitch,” someone said.

“But look. The barbed wire is facing out,” Chris said. “It’s to protect the armory from the people.”

“This is some real zombie apocalypse shit.”

“Isn’t it though?”

“Seizure!” someone yelled.

I scanned the darkness and saw a body twitching on the ground. The movements of a seizure have an inhuman cadence to them. I knelt beside a woman my age and tried to hold her head off the pavement. The seizure gave her unnatural strength and quickly my knuckles shredded on the concrete. Soon the shaking stopped and her eyes half opened. She had the saliva covered grin of an infant and an exhausted look of relief came over her face. “She’ll be alright,” a male voice said. “This happens a lot.”

Chris followed me now to the front desk. I wrapped my knuckles in Band-Aids from the first aid kit. We sat in silence for a moment.

“Patrick? I am supposed to come to you to do an intake,” a guest asked me.

I took one of the packets sitting in front of me at the desk, shrugged and began reading through it with her, stammering through each question about her sexual preferences and income history. She was patient with me, confirming after each section she was signing on the right line. To my

dismay, I realized a line of people were forming behind her and I'd have to repeat the ridiculous process many times. I was beginning to sweat through my clothes. Looking to my left I saw Chris was going through the packet highlighting the signature lines. The next intakes took moments as the guest flipped through the packet signing the highlighted lines.

It seemed to all die down at once. Suddenly the halls were empty, the chairs in the waiting area were empty. The old armory building had passed the fuck out. The only sound was gasping and hacking from the rooms where people slept.

"Well," Chris said. "I think I've seen enough."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"I sure as shit ain't staying here tonight. I got a buddy who lets me sleep in his truck downtown. I thought I'd come check it out, but this is too crazy for me."

My assumption that Chris worked for the shelter had been wrong.

"Looks like I can catch the last city bus back downtown. Hey, catch me for a drink sometime," Chris said. He walked out into the night. To this day, I use what I learned from him every goddamn day on the job.

"The best computer is a man, and it's the only one that can be mass-produced by unskilled labor."

— Wernher Von Braun

### Miles and Tina

Miles and Tina were meek and cordial during the intake process. Listless and resigned, they settled into the torture of completing the stack of paper work as if it were relentless cosmic punishment. Like Prometheus' nightly encounter with the eagle sent to eat his regenerating immortal liver, the homeless shelter intake forms were a reminder of every mistake you may or may not have made in your life and just who's picking up the bill for the

night's stay. Throughout it all, Tina had the sweet, loving wet eyes of a grandmother. Miles exuded an impossible sadness. They tried to wrap their minds around each question about their sexual preferences and income as if they were living another lucid dream. I noticed Miles was carrying a copy of Rick Atkinson's 'The Guns at Last Light,' part three in a trilogy about WWII. My father had once given it to me to read. Once the intake package was complete and a silence fell between us, I pointed at the book, "I am reading that," I said.

"Oh now you've done it," Tina said.

The light of life returned to Miles' eyes. Like a reunion with a long lost friend, his eyes fell on mine and slowly a smile came to skeletal face. "Are you interested in history?"

"It's a hobby of mine," I said, scanning the packet to look for missing signatures.

"I think you made a new friend," Tina said somewhat mockingly. "Be careful, he'll talk your ear off. Where do we sleep?"

"Upstairs, you'll see the bed numbers on the floor," I said.

They disappeared into the chaos of the shelter. I didn't think too much about them. They arrived just before lights out. It was my Friday. Before my weekend. I always tried to clean the 'Bag and Tag' room. Items left at the shelter for a week were thrown away. This had to be done as there were many items left during a week, so much so we regularly filled the dumpster. It may sound cruel, but there was no possible way to keep these items. It was a scary and dangerous task and for some reason I was the only one drawn to it.

The bags collected over the week were kept in a former ammunition cage in the basement of the armory. The piles of bags sometimes were 6 feet tall. It was a damp, airless room. The odor was thick. I found throwing these things out was best done right before my weekend as so often the owners returned on my days off to ask for them and have their breakdowns and deal with the loss of their only copies of their children's baby pictures while I was safely hidden at a bar, reading my copy of "The Guns at Last Light."

Abandoned guests' belongings ranged from perfectly organized suitcases and folded blankets to black trash bags of dirty and random things thrown together. I went through these bags looking for identifying information to shred, or copies of ID and birth certificates to save. Clothes and items of value... cell phones and laptops I destroyed. I put weapons in the weapon's box, a collection of bejeweled blades and makeshift shanks. Medications were collected and destroyed, their labels shredded. There was little in the way of drugs or cash, these two commodities were carefully protected. All items had to be processed and destroyed as they couldn't be re-donated to other guests, this would lead to accusations of theft.

Not to say I didn't snoop, but the novelty of finding stolen identities or uncovering heart breaking tragedies told in collected prison letters to children, wore off quickly. I do remember finding in a series of well-organized suitcases, evidence of a complex interstate identity fraud operation. Mail, canceled checks, bank statements and copies of driver's licenses from several states were neatly labeled, alphabetized and sorted into separate folders. I once found a collection of different handgun parts, metal files and specialized gunsmithing tools. Often I found the tools of the sex trade. As someone mystified and frightened by my own sexuality, I did not understand these tools or their intended use. Like my own sexuality at the time, I threw them away.

As a result of meth's prevalence in the homeless community, much of what I found broken were electronics, collections of cables and empty lighters. The later stages of meth addiction brought out a raccoon-like desire to collect and inspect electronics, peer at their baffling insides and tote them around, unwilling to part with them due to their hypothetical value.

There were few actual narcotics. Oceans of Gabapentin. Gabapentin was the opiate replacement doctors were prescribing at the time. There was no doubt many of the guests had long-term debilitating pain problems. Hunched over walkers, shattered from accidents or reeling from some combat trauma, the pain was real. The gabapentin was an insult and the heroin was Gabepentin's replacement. All this gabapentin was poured out and the bottles destroyed. The gabapentin then filtered through the city's sewer system and spilled into the river where it dulled the last gasping pains of dying salmon, whose offspring no doubt dabble in heroin now.

Marijuana and meth pipes were in abundance, carefully wrapped, like Christmas ornaments in socks, Crown Royal bags or pencil boxes. These I crushed into a metal bucket. Syringes went into biohazard boxes. At first I did this with the care of a surgeon, but as the night went on I treated this dangerous objects like straws fished from a bartender's slop sink.

It was my compulsion to do this sad task, I realize now, because of my father. Weekly he scrubbed our house, a bucket of ammonia water trailing behind him. He seemed to always do this on Sunday. Gasping, coughing and swearing, I would hear him approach on all fours, scrubbing the baseboard in the hall outside of my room. Then he would clean my room, scour the walls, scrub the inside of the closet. He would take small breaks to light a cigarette or switch over the laundry. This weekly ritual must have had a cathartic quality to him. No doubt this cleaning was inspired by some childhood trauma he never related to me before he died, I carry this tradition on at work, on Fridays. Numbly, distant, I clean. Mind you, I rarely clean anything the other 6 days a week. I do gasp and smoke, though.

Having finished the 'Bag and Tag,' room. I went outside to smoke and discovered Miles laying on the wet pavement in a fetal position.

"Can I get you anything?" I asked.

"No, I'm just coming down," he said.

"Should I call an ambulance?" I asked.

"No, I'm just coming down," he repeated, then let out a low wailing moan.

I guessed that was the moan he was making in the room where his bed was and subsequently was kicked out by the other eight couples in the room. "Come on, you'll die out here," I said, putting my hand under his arm. Slowly he climbed to his feet. We walked slowly back into the building and sat in the cafeteria. He was going unfathomable pain. I sat near him, trying not to make a noise for a while until I noticed his copy of "The Guns at Last Light" at a table near us. I retrieved it and tried to find my place in it. Atkinson's writing was heavy on foreign names. The names of the Soviet generals looked alike. I realized I was reading aloud in a low whisper. I

also realized Miles was listening. So I continued to read, occasionally raising my voice to be heard over his moans. The sun was coming up and people were beginning to leave the shelter when the Soviets reached the outskirts of Berlin. Tina appeared and put her hands on Miles' shoulders which he seemed to both need and recoil from.

"See, I warned you," she said. She took charge of him and I left them at the table. I had a few thousand more things to do before I could clock out.

I didn't think about Miles and Tina on my days off. I almost needed reintroducing to them at the bus line when my Monday came around. Miles appeared before me with a shopping bag.

"Here, I checked this out at the library for you, have you seen it?" he said.

I took the DVD he offered me. It was a copy of the German language film "Stalingrad."

"It's supposed to be the most realistic portrayal of World War Two," he said. "I saw it and loved it. Take it, watch it, tell me what you think," Miles said somberly.

I took it home and watched it. It was amazing. I learned Miles and Tina got stranded in town trying to attend their son's basic training graduation. Reading between the lines, it sounded like some symptom of addiction stranded them. They were suddenly without purpose. Their son was deployed. They were empty nesters, and the idea of finding housing seemed suddenly silly without a kid. Getting sober in a shelter seems counterintuitive but then you have to realize how lonely the world is. Shelters may be a slice of hell, but they're not lonely. I've known many people who disappeared into prison-like apartments in the suburbs, who drifted far from my mind until I heard that they had taken their own lives. Yes, there is a part of the homeless population who are voluntary homeless because they are just lethally lonely. Miles and Tina were lonely.

Over the coming weeks Miles brought me other movies and books from the library. Both he and Tina were putting on weight, flirting or squabbling about small things. Valentine's Day fell on one of my Fridays. Miles and Tina were in particularly good spirits at the bus line.

"Can you beat that? We were just hanging out and a guy came up to us and gave us both a pack of cigarettes with a five dollar bill and a lighter. God Damned most thoughtful thing I've ever seen" Miles said, hugging Tina. "I mean shit... it hits the spot on so many levels. It's like a small piece of freedom. If I ever hit it big, I'm going to do that."

Miles and Tina didn't have time for me, they sat opposite each other in the auditorium talking most of the night. They went to bed early and were up for the first bus back to town. I should have felt good for them, but it accentuated my own loneliness. It's a brutal added layer of loneliness to be jealous of an old couple who survived the decades together. Had a child, had a past. I was just a disgusting, shaking middle-aged monster with no chance of recreating what they had. I was headed for something more like my own parents. My father was insane, haunting hotels in the suburbs and mother was filing for divorce after forty-five years. There seemed no solace in reading about World War Two at the bar the next morning. The weekend quickly devolved into another lonely bender.

Tina wasn't there when I got back to work after my days off. Miles was distant, busying himself over books and notepads. I hoped Tina was visiting family or in the stages of getting housing, but I didn't want to pry. Besides, there were a thousand other tragedies to look after in the shelter. The rains of spring were drenching everyone. Dry cold can be preferable to tepid rain. Tepid rain leads to the rot of limbs. The holiday spirit of giving was long gone and there was a desperate shortage of socks, shoes and coats in the shelter. By the end of the week, the Bag and Tag room was overflowing. Nearly every item was soaked. I took heaps of wet rotten socks, molding cotton undershirts, damp suitcases, soaked mail to the dumpster. It was 4am when I finished the job. I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat next to Miles.

"You got a minute?" he asked.

I peered at my phone, "I got hours."

"So," Miles began and took a deep shaking breath. He seemed driven, focused, and spun. "Ever wonder why the V-2 Rocket looks so different?"

"The Nazi rocket used to bombard London?" I asked.

"That's the one. Why the fuck does it look different? It looks like modern technology. Why is that?" Miles asked.

"Aliens," I said.

"Well, that's easy to say, but how do we know that? How can we prove it?" Miles said.

"I guess we can't, can we?" I asked.

"Well, I think I did," Miles said. He produced notebooks from a bag and opened books to pages he had marked with torn pieces of paper. "So, the V-2 rocket had a range of about 300 miles, or so we assume. Why was the range 300 miles?"

"That was the limits of the technology at the time, I guess," I said, peering at the graphs, parabolas, and equations he had drawn in his notebooks.

"That is the range of the rocket when loaded with 1000 pounds of explosives. Now, why would they engineer a rocket to blindly deliver 1000 pounds of explosives to England, and smash into the ground at random places. It doesn't make sense. The V-2 was a worthless weapon. It was absurdly inaccurate and the damage it caused was mostly as an artillery projectile. The payload exploded when the rocket had already buried itself into the earth. It doesn't make sense," Miles said.

"Well, I guess since it was a new technology, that was the best they could do," I said.

"Think about it. The thing was perfectly engineered using groundbreaking technology. Every aspect of it was an engineering marvel of forethought. But then it was used to randomly plop TNT down on the English countryside. It doesn't make any goddamn sense. I don't buy it. But what if it wasn't designed to deliver that 1000 pound payload 27 miles into the atmosphere and plop back down to the earth 300 fucking miles from where they launched it?"

"What else would it have been used for? 300 miles isn't very far. English and American bombers were going thousands of miles by then," I said.

"What if the payload wasn't 1000 lbs of TNT? So I did some calculations. The V-2 range is entirely dependent on what it is carrying. It takes a certain mass of fuel to propel both the rocket itself and the payload... imagine if the payload was more, say a disassembled tank. The range would be considerably shorter. A matter of miles. Now what if the payload was a single bullet," said Miles.

"Well, if it were a single bullet it was carrying I imagine it could go much farther," I said.

"Yes. So I thought, what if the payload the Nazi scientists were planning for was something like mustard gas. Then the V-2 could possibly reach the United States from Germany. The Nazis had a great deal of Mustard gas in surplus, we know that as a fact. But then I looked for evidence of the test flights to America or into the Russian frontier. They would have tested that," Miles said. "There would have been some evidence somewhere of V-2 Rockets firing longer ranges... unless..."

"Unless what?" I asked.

"The target wasn't Russia or the United States. This rocket was tested, but its destination meant it burned up before re-entering the atmosphere... that's why there's no evidence of it," Miles said.

"What was the target then?"

"Space. If you run the numbers of how far a V-2 rocket could fly with little or no payload, its range straight up is 127 miles, or, outer space. Exactly. Exactly outer space. No further, no less. Do you want to know the maximum amount of cargo a V-2 rocket can carry to reach outer space, according to my calculations?"

"How much?" I asked.

"132 lbs. And guess... take a guess as to how much Hitler weighed?"

"132 lbs?"

"Yup. And did they ever find Hitler's body?"

"I thought the Russians did," I said.

"Prove it," Miles said.

I looked around the shelter auditorium and found no evidence to support the claim the Russians had found Hitler's body. "Why would he want to take a one way ride to outer space?"

"See, that's the question. What happened that the Nazis built 3000 of these things, then started using them to clumsily hurl TNT at London? Why 3000? I can show you a list of about three thousand ranking Nazi officials tried for war crimes. Were these escape pods?"

"What would they have done when they got to space?" I asked.

"Gotten a ride," Miles said, grining. "What else? That is what all the information points to. The V-2 rocket was an escape pod."

I was annoyed that this made even a little sense. I rubbed my eyes. "Hitler was an alien? An anti-semitic alien? An alien that traveled lightyears to commit genocide against an earthbound race of people?"

"Was that a means to an end?" Miles asked. "Was he an alien preying on our barbaristic tendencies... to mobilize our species to build just enough technology to get the fuck out of here?"

"So he was sort of a Robinson Crusoe" I asked.

"Yes. And if you read Robinson Crusoe, he was extremely racist as well. The Jews were just the alien's version of the black man, Friday in that book," Miles said.

A long pause settled between us. I ran it all over in my head. Really, there was a plausibility to it. I had met many Nazi apologists working in shelters over the years. I had never met someone who extended the scope of the Nazi war crimes into intergalactic tourism. It was somewhat comforting to think that a human being wasn't capable of what Hitler had accomplished. But having worked with terrible white social workers who chanted, 'You go, girl,' at black guests until they left the shelter, I was certain Hitler was alive and well and still on this planet and living in every one of us.

"What do we do with this knowledge?" I asked.

"I mean, I could write a book I guess," Miles seemed relieved to have gotten this off his chest. "I think the government is hiding this knowledge."

"I don't think the government needs to hide anything, that's the true expose," I said. "Maybe working in this field has ruined my faith in the collective efforts of our species."

"I think people knew... people who once worked in this armory. Look at all the old technology, the old network cables in the ceiling... It's really an armory built to survive nuclear fallout. And the Russians built fallout shelters, but were they really designed to protect them from each other? Were we afraid the Russians were going to attack? Or someone else?"

"Hitler might attack from space?" I asked.

"Someone might," Miles said.

The next week, I found Miles' manifestos in the Bag and Tag room. I sat cross legged surrounded by the bags of discarded lives, skimming his notebooks. As intriguing as his theories were, I don't think the collected scientific knowledge of intergalactic anti-semites and German rocket scientists could crack the secret of sobriety and marriage. There's as much evidence the legacy of the Nazis isn't space flight, but meth. I never saw Miles and Tina again. I'd like to think he escaped this concentration camp of a planet to somewhere nice. Somewhere where he and Tina were together, smoking their Valentine's Day cigarettes, spending their five bucks and borrowing lighters from no one. I wonder if the shelter intake packets are all that remains of some people after I threw away their baby pictures, their letters, their valuables. And probably writing this is my attempt to be more the sum of my parts, the trash bag full of belongings I own.

*"I got a generation brainwashed to pop pills and smoke pot til they brains rot."*

-Eminem

## Nadine

Nadine was kicked out of the shelter for a few weeks. The story was they found syringes in her bed. Who 'they' were was never clear and what 'they' were doing in her bed, I'll never know. I guess she had more than a few enemies in the shelter. She often stopped by the bus line to chat with me. She had a preferred doorway nearby. I was the last stop on her daily wandering. She had dyed red hair, a walker overflowing with bags, and the bitter countenance of someone bobbing in a sea of heroin. She assured me the VA had nothing for her. She already lost everything.

"They should make Drugstore Cowboy II," she said, peering down the street. The bus stop was in Chinatown, where a lot of the original was shot. "People need to see that shit. Out of the hospital, five years later. I wanna see Matt Dillon a skeleton. I wanna see him barely able to recognize his ex-wife. That's the movie they should make. Or maybe he had a kid and is really fucked up and his kid is fucked up too. They argue in drugstores until they are asked to leave. They have no where the fuck to go because it's raining and they are in the drugstore looking at the cellphone chargers. Drugstore Cowboy II"

"They do make it look easy in Hollywood, don't they," I said.

"Pulp Fiction II. Everyone is in a fucking homeless shelter. Maybe that's what your shelter is, Pulp Fiction II. Instead of a quirky soundtrack of golden oldies, this time the soundtrack will be the white trash metal they play on their shitty bluetooth speakers up there when you are trying to sleep. Or, 'Shelter Bus Spotting' a sequel to Trainspotting. No quirky soundtrack, no redemption. Just a shot of someone with half their brain left, staring at their phone waiting for a shelter bus. Box office gold."

"What about a prequel?" I asked.

"Where everyone is raped by their uncle?" The backstory to addiction? Pulp Fiction, the prequel? Where everyone is a nerd in school and we learn why they are fucking trying to act hard on the street because they are over compensating by saying 'Fuck' a lot?" Have you read Catch-22? That's the fucking prequel. Boredom and terror. Or maybe we meet the kids of Klickitat Street as adults. The next Beverly Cleary novel. Oh, here they are, right fucking here. In line waiting to go to a shelter in beautiful

Portland Fucking Oregon. Ramona, Henry... they're here tonight, want an autograph?" She called to the line of people waiting for the bus. As correct as her thinking was, I could see how she had enemies. She had the idea in her teeth and was going to rip it to shreds.

"How about a fucking Maralyn Manson album about after the goth weddings and fake suicide attempts. A song where someone is kicked out of McDonalds just for being scary and old. I'd listen to that. 'I wanna fuck you like an animal...' Maybe he was just talking about what shelters want to do to you."

"If these fucking artists think they're bringing awareness to drug addiction by showing and talking about sexy young people just starting to get hooked, they are fucking mistaken. Instead of some fucking soft focus footage of some thin actress taking that first hit. Show my fucking leg," she said, pulling up her long dress to reveal the sores and boils. "Lets have the cool indie soundtrack when I'm using a dirty syringe I found on the street to clean and drain pustule wounds because I don't give a fuck anymore. Let's have that indie soundtrack when I go to a visitation with my daughter and don't recognize her. I don't fucking recognize her. I dream about her constantly but when she's in front of me, I don't recognize her. And when I figure out which one she fucking is, I see in her eyes, disgust and pity. Then the music swells and we all do some Kung Fu or some shit. Tic Tok Shuffle."

"Christ," I said. "It is all bullshit, isn't it?"

"You think? How about a music video that's ten fucking years of different rehabs, trying to get something like a life going and fucking it up over and over. But this is part where it gets quiet before the drum solo and the goth kid screams... about seven years in they tell you rehab only works about twenty percent of the time, so you were fucked the whole time. Matrix shit. What if you didn't take the pill? Said 'fuck the mirage' and just went to work at artificial computer Taco Bell? Had health insurance, 401k and an ok car? That's not an option. Not in the fucking movies, man. Hey Keanu Reeves, what if I told you you are a fucking monster that sells heroin to babies?"

"Well, Jesus fuck," I said.

"Don't get me started on Jesus. There is nothing... NOTHING in the bible about Methadone. Nothing. Not one word. Don't tell me about metaphors and intention. When God wrote that book, wasn't there like 30 million people on the planet? He knew there'd be 7 billion soon enough. You think he'd thrown in a chapter on methadone. No, he just put his books in cheap hotels where people do drugs when their disability check comes in. Bullshit. It's all bullshit. I'm going to die in a doorway. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow. Thanks for listening. Or fuck you for getting me started, I'm not sure which one it is" she said, pushing her walker into the night.

*"A question that sometimes drives me hazy: am I or are the others crazy?"*

-Albert Einstein

Shelter workers can be the worst. Megalomaniacal, wielding ungodly power over the lives of the most vulnerable, preaching politics, fiercely punishing dissent. Shelter workers prove their value to each other in reality TV battles to the death, every day on the job, undermining and torturing each other with petty lectures and passive aggressive computer-printed signs. When I started working in shelters, the staff was often old folks who had seen it all. Slowly, recent college grads infiltrated the system, got everyone of any merit fired, then reigned over dysfunctional chaos, speaking in that heavy NPR brogue, ending sentences with the word 'right,' even when what they were saying was abhorrent and obviously wrong. If I hear someone describe themselves as 'super excited,' again I will cry, because that will mean genuine excitement is an arcane concept, no more than a rhetorical tool. For these grumpy reasons, I preferred the graveyard shifts. The shifts were scarier, dirtier and you had little or no supervision but you dealt with fewer god-damned aspiring social workers. We had a recent addition to our crew and Mike (my coworker) and I were skeptical. She was quiet. Mike and I had worked at shelters together before and knew the job could be unbearable with the wrong crew. We let her busy herself in the kitchen while we smoked with our favorite guest, John.

"Who is the new lady?" John asked with a shit-eating smirk, snow collecting on his gray eyebrows.

"I don't know, I just met her myself." Mike said.

"Her name is Sandy," John said, answering his own question. John smoked a collection of borrowed cigarettes. He brought out a cigarette and showed it to us. "She smokes American Spirits," he said.

"Ya know, one Christmas I raised money and bought packs of cigarettes to give out at the shelter. The one brand no one wanted was American Spirits. It says something about a brand, if no one will take them when they are free... at a homeless shelter," I said.

"Well, yeah, it doesn't hit the spot like Marlboros," John said. "But they are nice. Kind of like a light perfume," he said, smelling Sandy in his mind. "It takes a minute to get her to open up, but she's a real neat lady. She loved John Jr." John said, referring to his eleven year old son who lived with him in the shelter.

"Oh, so she's met the children, has she, that's a big step," Mike said.

"I mean, you have to admit, she's beautiful," John said.

"Is she like the people who work in the evening?" I asked skeptically.

"No, she isn't nosy at all," John said, already done with his cigarette. "A man can dream, can't he?" John was impish, over fifty years of age. He loved his son and his son loved him. I say that because seldom do you see it as magically out in the open as you did between the two of them, similarly dressed, bickering and strolling through Portland's downtown. There was a beautiful honesty to him. His honesty extended to speaking about his romantic inclinations. "If I was younger. If I had, like, a real job. And was taller. If..."

"I'd like to meet Sandy," Mike remarked. We stamped out our cigarettes on the wet street and went back into the shelter.

As we walked into the foyer, a shelter guest was yelling at Sandy. She was sitting behind the shelter computer with exasperated look. Sandy looked at Mike and I for help. As Sandy was in no real danger, Mike and I took our time removing our coats and shaking the snow off. John knew the yelling lady. He went and sat next to Sandy behind the desk.

"Fucking white princess cunt watching everything, oh of course John, you got some kind of god damned opinion on this," the woman yelled.

"Hey, I don't know what's going on, I'm just here to listen," John said.

"The bitch is mean mugging me as I go to the bathroom. Bitch, keep you to yourself," she said.

Sandy and John had nothing to add. Satisfied at having the last word, the woman returned to the auditorium where everyone slept.

"Probably having a bad day," John said in a low voice.

"I get it," Mike said. "People feel under a microscope here. It's kind of handy to have a cell phone and stare at it, just so you aren't staring at people. It's kind of like a nightmare. A lucid dream. You dream you are sleeping on an auditorium floor in a building that resembles your old high school and all these people are watching you... only it's real. Or is it real? Am I going to wake up any second? Do I still remember my locker combination?"

"You'll get used to it," John said. "I never thought I would. John Jr. and I have been in shelters for seven months now. It was terrifying at first. But you get used to it."

We all stared at Sandy. I think maybe she preferred being yelled at by the woman to us three men staring at her.

"Well," Mike began. "Welcome to the emergency family shelter."

Having been divorced a few thousand times myself, I peered at Sandy. Her look wasn't curated. No outward sign of style. She wore jeans and a solid color button down shirt. I glanced over at Mike. He wore MC Hammer pants, a leopard print shirt and large round glasses. I looked at John. He wore wrinkled sweatpants from the donation closet. His shoes were velcro and tattered. I looked down at my own faux-adult costume of a collared shirt and sweater. The silence between us continued.

"No, I'm not done," the woman returned suddenly from the auditorium. "They told me if I wasn't in my bed again, I'd lose my spot. Those bitches at

night said that. What the fuck. I got a job. Listen, I got a job, a real job, not just sitting there judging people. She wants to sit there and stare at me and write little fucking notes in their computer. Fuck that." I glanced at Mike. He too thought the guest was making perfectly valid points. We just didn't know if Sandy was actually doing any of this. Was she from the office? Was she a plant? Is there such a thing as 'a plant' or were we just being paranoid?

"Well," I said shakily. "Sandy, are you staring at her?"

"My name is Angela," the guest said.

Sandy put her hands in the air. I turned the laptop around to face me and found she had not logged in. "I don't think she was doing that," I said as I logged into the computer. The nightly log came up. There was an insipid remark in it about "...being super excited about the new girl.' Angela leaned in and read the log.

"See, y'all say stupid shit in there. They really write down what time we get here?" Angela asked, scrolling down. "Oh, I see it. Guest angry at attendance policy. Yes I am angry at that bullshit. Listen. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I am. I thought you were one of those prissy bitches that sit up here and judge everything. I mean, I don't know you, I don't." she said. "You have to keep punching here, you have to. You stop punching, they punch you. And I got a kid I am trying to protect, it's crazy in here. It's crazy." Angela said.

"No, I get it," Mike said from behind his giant round glasses, flattening a crease in his MC Hammer pants. "It's fucking crazy."

"You, I don't know about you... I like you, but I got bad taste," Angela said, squinting at Mike. "I'm just going to say I'm sorry and have a good night." Angela slipped back into the auditorium.

"Want to smoke?" John asked after another pregnant pause. Sandy put on a jacket indicating she did.

Sandy offered John a cigarette without him asking.

"God damn it, you make me feel like a bum," John said, then laughed at the literal meaning of the statement. "I promise I will have my own tomorrow," he said. "Disability hits my bank account tomorrow around midnight and I'll get you a pack of those Wild West Cigarettes," he said.

"Don't worry about it," Sandy finally spoke. She was quiet for a moment, sucking on her designer cigarette, then she blurted, "So, everything that lady said was true, just it wasn't me. They are horrible at night here. This is my first double shift here and I almost walked out."

"No, don't do that. Stick to the graveyard crew. You'll be ok," John said, coaching her like a coworker. Mike and I thought of John as a coworker, a superior even, mostly because he was too smart to work for The Family Shelter and therefore smarter than us. Sort of how many people would eat at Olive Garden, but never would consider working there. Mike and I worked at Olive Garden.

"You know," I began telling one of my stock jokes. "They say 95% of people who smoke have a mental disability. I think that number is grossly misleading."

"It's actually closer to 100%" John and I said together. He had heard me say this before.

"Tell me about it," Sandy said. When she pulled from her cigarette her nose and ringed fingers were illuminated by the soft red glow. "Honestly, my mom had schizophrenia. It's fucking genetic, She smoked, I smoke. It's a matter of time until I'm in here screaming at someone."

"Do you actually have it?" John asked.

"No, I mean it's just something I worry about. Especially when a woman screams at me who reminds me of my mother, who was actually, literally, crazy." Sandy said.

"Angela is a good woman," John said. "She works hard. She is just in the stage where she no longer believes what they say at the day center. When I first got here they told me with my voucher, my income, they'd find me housing in no time. Three months passed and I was like, what the fuck? What about all these things you told me, that I was holding on to every day?

I mean I told my kid an apartment was just around the corner. Now I am a liar to my kid. What the fuck? I am used to it now. I know I could have saved more and maybe gotten a place on my own but fuck. I have John Jr. and sometimes I wanna take him out for pancakes or buy him a coat while we wait and... Anyway. Angela is John Jr. and I at three months. She's mad. Soon she'll be out here smoking," John said.

"It's interesting. Shelters will make you consider what really is crazy," I wondered out loud. "I have a full time job smoking and occasionally getting punched. Is that crazy or am I... or both."

"Or 'mad,' as they say in England," Mike said. He had a funny way of smoking, as if he was hiding from a Middle School recess monitor. With each drag he looked down the street, behind the dumpster, or behind him.

"Shouldn't everyone be mad?" John asked, smirking behind his cigarette.

"No disrespect, but I can't imagine you mad," I said, blinking as my own ash flew into my eyes. "I can picture you getting even, or explaining a situation... but I can't picture kicking shit over, yelling mad."

"You should have seen me as a young man. I was a handful," John said.

"Someone's gotta do it," Mike interjected. "Working here over nights I mean. It isn't so bad here overnights, it's crazy, but you get used to it. It's a crazy that grows on you," he said, adjusting his cufflinks and peeking behind a car.

"When you get older you stop worrying about what crazy is and start living. Or maybe you stop living and start being crazy," John said. "I mean you have to be crazy to end up homeless. Or mad at something, or mad or whatever..."

I think we were obsessing on the 'crazy' point as Sandy had referred to it, mentioning it often to assure her we weren't crazy. It wasn't working.

"It's disrespectful to use the word 'crazy,' people. It's a subjective word and makes an abusive narrative," Mike said in a condescending social worker accent.

"What do the kids say? Mental? John Jr. calls things mental. I thought it was a compliment for a while. He'd call me 'mental,' and I thought it meant I was thoughtful. You know, mental like 'intellectual'. I guess he was calling me retarded, which is a pretty retarded thing to do; to think being called 'mental,' was cool, when really it means retarded. Or crazy," John said.

"So crazy is the new mental?" Mike extrapolated. "Do they fit in a hierarchy? Retarded, mental and crazy?"

"I was in special education," John said. We waited for an insight to follow. He was silent.

"Did you like being called retarded?" Sandy asked after a brief pause.

"No, I fought you if you called me that. I considered myself crazy." John said.

"What made your mom crazy and not mental?" I asked, trying to keep the conversation going.

"Or retarded?" Sandy clarified. "Well, I guess because I was a kid. She lost her shit and moved me and my brother into the woods and we lived in a car. I don't remember living in the car as much as after when we went back to school. Other kids thought we were weird and somehow... this is weird to think about... we learned what happened to us by asking kids on the playground."

Mike, John, and I considered this for a moment. Mike spoke first, "Where does the playground end?"

"You sound mental," John said.

"Is the shelter an extension of the playground?" Mike asked.

"Well, there are people who think they are better than you, that put you down. I mean the women who work here in the evening," Sandy said. "I've done things with my life too, ya know. They didn't have to be so high and mighty. I spent four years in the Air Force during a fucking war. I was pretty high and mighty doing that, but like, literally."

"Four years?" John asked.

"Four years getting talked down to, four years supporting fucking combat missions and four years living in hostile fucking countries. I like to think I am pretty tough, but a 25 year old shelter worker can still talk to me in ways that make me cry. I don't cry. I never fucking cry. Crying is not something I do. People die, I don't cry. I get cheated on. I don't cry." She looked at her stub of a cigarette and threw it on the ground. "Well, apparently I guess I do now."

Her dress, her demeanor made sense now. It was a uniform. It meant, 'no bullshit.' Little did she know, working in a shelter was all bullshit. She was learning quickly what our brand of crazy meant. She realized I was staring at her, and sneered at me.

"How did you end up taking a job here?" Mike asked. "I am always curious. I see people with special degrees, people with no training. I guess I am trying to work out for myself, how the hell did I end up here?" Mike thoughtfully considered one of the many decorative pendants hanging from his neck as he spoke.

"I mean the obvious reason, I guess. Maybe to help someone out like me as a kid. You hear about homeless vets and you want to help because you think you know something about it. I was so excited to work here and I got here and I fucking cried. Not because of some sad homeless person, but because some kid, but because some child with a job title lectured me in front of a group of homeless people about... I guess it doesn't matter," Sandy said.

"What was basic training like? My brother went into the Army, I didn't want to cut my hair. You see in movies people screaming right in the face of people who go into the army. I thought I would snap. I was an angry young man. Or 'mad.' Hell, I couldn't imagine someone yelling at John Jr. like that," John said.

"Well," Sandy said. "It was a lot like this, I guess. Bunks, people, strangers. A lot like this. Only I didn't cry."

"Shelters will make you crazy," John said. "Yes they will, shelters will make you crazy. Those people who work here at night, they are crazy, Angela is going crazy. I'm retarded and Mike, well... he's just fucking mental." John said. "Patrick is just a mess. Welcome to the team."

John was right, Sandy did go softly crazy. She moved full time to Graveyard shift. She spent nights looming over John as they smoked outside, reliving their lives up to that point. John was almost in heaven. Sometimes John came in so drunk and stoned all he could do was sing. Sandy would stoically color in the coloring books left for the kids as John sang.

*If you leave me now  
You'll take away the biggest part of me  
Ooh-ooh, no, baby please don't go  
And if you leave me now  
You'll take away the very heart of me  
Ooh-ooh, no, baby please don't go  
Ooh-ooh, girl, I just want you to stay*

As Spring drug on, no one who had stayed with the official shelter housing program found housing. More auxiliary programs were added to the homeless experience. Laptops appeared in kids' hands, special busing was arranged, social workers toured the facilities with clipboards, adding to the abject terror and exhaustion of the parents... but no housing. The kids no longer wanted to go to school. There was a daily social disobedience protest at the bus stop. I'll never forget one moment when a principal came out to try and coax kids onto the bus. She asked the kids one by one, who among them was "a rock star kiddo?" They all treated her like an embarrassing mistake and looked in the opposite direction. It was a heartwarming testament to the spirit and sanity of young people. Those kids won't grow up to be as dumb and insincere as we are. "Don't call me a fucking kiddo, cunt," one kid said.

"Just so you know, I've been applying for jobs and I used you as a reference," Sandy said as we hoisted trash bags into the dumpster. This was a two-person job as the gate to the dumpster had a coded lock and the lock on the dumpster itself had a coded lock as well. The codes were different but maddeningly similar. Facing this bureaucratic conundrum alone, minutes before the shift ended and the bar opened, could lead to

suicide. The shelter generated ten bags of trash a night and this last task had a cathartic element. With each bag slammed into the dumpster we purged guilt and fear. Slamming bags of diapers, wet wipes and rotten food into a dumpster at 8am on a quiet residential street while having detox sweats is one of the few times in my life I've ever felt sexy.

"But they promised us jobs at the day center when the shelter closes," I said, in a mocking tone, fully intending on leaving myself.

"I've been looking at houses in West Virginia. I have a VA loan I can use and there's no way I can afford anything around here," Sandy said. "I don't want to stay here. What are you going to do? You aren't staying are you?"

"I don't think so. I was thinking, you can go to a bank and tell them you work at a homeless shelter and get approved for a 30-year mortgage on a house. Isn't that fucked up? It's clear to the international financial banking machine that homelessness isn't going anywhere. It's a safe bet to loan money for a house on... the industry based on the absence of housing," I said. "Go to West Virginia. Think of me on the anniversary of my death."

As we shut the dumpster lid we saw the school bus leave, revealing the majority of the kids and parents who had lined up to catch it, still standing there. Sandy and I decided to investigate.

Writhing on the ground, bawling or standing stone faced with arms crossed were most of our school aged children. Some mothers eyed us with suspicion, others dispersed into the day, dragging their kids by the arm. Walking back to the front of the shelter we saw John Jr. ambling by, headed obviously anywhere but school. I should end this short story now with Sandy and I realizing we were as big of dropouts as the kids who hated their schools, but something redemptive did happen next.

John Jr. finally plopped down on a curb. John Sr. caught up to him.

"But your P-I-P-E meeting is today, it's a new school and a new chance," John Sr. pleaded.

"IEP?" I asked. IEP was short for Individualized Education Plan. I knew it well. I knew what the goddamned government acronym meant... I was trapped. Sandy, having escaped in the confusion, waved as she drove by. I flipped her off.

"Hey, John Jr. Patrick used to be a teacher," John Sr. said.

John Jr. shrugged as if to say ‘so?’ I shrugged and winced too. This scene occurred roughly five blocks from the bar. I was fairly certain that was where Sandy had gone. John Sr. gave me doe eyes. We had recently received an all-staff email about professional boundaries. Had we not gotten that email, I would have abandoned John Sr. and joined Sandy for fierce poisoning whiskey and cold wet bubbling beer at the Marathon Taverna and Grill. But the shelter system had set me up again. I had to defy that retarded email.

“Where the fuck does he go to school?” I said.

School parking lots hadn’t changed. Gripping the wheel, I resumed my former teacher work routine of full body anxiety sweats. Middle schoolers ambled into the building. I peered at John Jr., slumped in the back seat, staring forward. “Look at all the pretty girls,” John Sr. said. Before the sweating got too bad, I popped my seatbelt and escaped the car. “We’ll be right back,” John Sr. said.

Walking towards the front door of the school I imagined what they’d think of us. Two homosexual meth addicts on some court mandated attempt to school the kid? John Sr. was wearing a hoodie with a video game decal on it he had borrowed from his son. I was wearing a tattered sport coat I found in the shelter donations. Frankly, a meth addiction and love affair between us would have added to the quality of both of our lives.

The blast of stale school air hit me as we walked into the building. This reminded me how aroma is a powerful trigger for memories. And how powerful an aroma a middle school had. From humid ripe shelter air, to dry middle school air, I’m surprised we weren’t both stricken with pneumonia the instant we entered the door. On top of cleaning products and mildew was the terrible body sprays children wore. These cheap body sprays dueled and cavorted in the air like the ugly intentions of the middle school mind. As I sniffed the hideous chaos in disdain, an adult passed. He wore his keys on a lanyard and his shirt was tucked in over his large belly. “Can I help you?” he asked. I avoided eye contact.

“This way,” John Sr. pointed to a sign that said ‘Office’. We ignored the man and walked on.

In the office the secretaries ignored us for a moment, hoping we’d disappear. John Sr. looked at me and whispered, “PIPE meeting?” I took a deep breath and decided to try to take control, if only to hasten the drinks.

My voice broke as I tried to pronounce the words, ‘excuse me.’ No one looked up. A drip of sweat rolled down the small of my back. I looked over

at John Sr. I mustered my courage and walked past the main desk, by the secretaries and into the principal's office.

"We are here for an IEP meeting," I said to a woman seated behind a desk. She wore fluffy boots, yoga tights, a fluffy sweater, had hair dyed and styled like some sort of fighting bird. "I am here on behalf of the Family Shelter."

"Oh fine, I am sure they are waiting for us in the resource room," the principal said. She stood and walked out of the office and down the hallway. John Sr. and I followed, trying to mimic her purposeful stride. "Well, I didn't catch your name," she asked, which I ignored, mostly because I couldn't remember it. "Well this is a preliminary meeting before the IEP is drafted... we need to gather data and make measurable goals..."

"Man, these schools all look and smell the same inside as fucking 1972. John Jr. wouldn't go to the other school. They said they tried to make him eat vay-gone-aise. Creeped him out. And he hit some bully or something. But man, it was a school for homeless kids. Who's really a bully when everyone is broke?" John lowered his voice to a level anyone could still hear but had the tone of confidentiality. "The principal is hot. Man, were my principals hot growing up and I just didn't know it? Funny to think about these people getting laid, getting drunk. I wonder if they really do.' I could smell us now, tobacco, hand soap, and shelter. We entered the classroom and peered at the decorations, the computers and the cages for class pets. We folded ourselves into tiny school chairs behind a low desk.

"We don't always meet the guardians," the principal said. "This is a pleasant surprise."

"I am from the Family Shelter," I stated in knee jerk fashion to dispel any rumors about my sexuality.

"Yeah, John Jr's mom passed away," John Sr. said, eying me with contempt. Apparently he thought he could do far better than me too.

"I work at the family shelter, that is," I said. "I don't live there."

"You kind of do," John Sr. said.

"I do not!" I insisted, bickering with my older lover.

"You work enough overtime. We love you and everything but jeez, sometimes we wonder if you have any life at all." John Sr. said.

"Who is 'we'?" I said jealously.

"Everyone who lives there," John Sr. Said. "We all think you work too much. We don't even like fucking being there, why are you there all the time? Oh, pardon my language."

"Because. John. I hate everything. I have bills. That's why I'm there," I said defensively.

"I'm just saying, it's kind of creepy to work at a homeless shelter to begin with. It's like, admirable and shit (pardon my language) but obviously somethings wrong with you," John Sr. broke out into a stoner laugh. I looked mortified at him. He seemed to remember where he was and a look of mortification came over him too. "Seriously though. Patrick works there. He has a job."

"Well..." the principal tried to continue...

"And if I wasn't there all the time I wouldn't be here now, doing god knows what good. What did you even get me into anyway?" I said, wanting desperately to leave, losing my shit.

"Hay, it's ok," John Sr. said, playfully putting his hand on mine. I sneered at him and clasped his hand back. We again remembered where we were and were both mortified. There is to be no playful sexual humor in schools...

"We have levels of compliance here. John Jr. will learn quickly. Green, yellow and red. For instance, doing your work seated at your desk is a green," the principal said.

"And we are at a red now," John said, again stoner laughing.

"I'm sorry, we've been up all night. We are a little giddy," I said, my eyes now fixed on the clock face in the corner of the room. As a child I had spent years staring at those big white clocks while enduring school, as a teacher I stared at them... now I was doing it again.

"Maybe we should get John Jr. in the room. This meeting is about him," the principal said.

John Sr. jumped up, "I'll go get him," he said and skipped out the door, leaving me with his nightmare.

"I am Ms. Hannigan, I will be his teacher and case manager." I looked at the woman. She was dressed in earthtones. She had high red cheeks and an irritated air to her. An awkward moment passed and she opened her mouth to say more. Her teeth were too white. I had the vague suspicion she drank a great deal of red wine. I liked her.

"As someone who works in the shelter, and someone who's been in these meetings before, I just wanted to put a face to the names. We get a lot of calls from principals, teachers, CPS workers. I don't know if this makes sense, but it seems like they call and visit when we aren't around on purpose. To confirm some fatalistic idea they have about the kid and family and whatever," I said, trying to sound adult.

"That's wonderful. Can I have your card?" Ms. Hannigan asked.

I patted my pockets looking for the business card I never had. "No, I forgot them but I'll leave my number," I said.

"Good," Ms. Hannigan said.

"I work overnights mostly so It will be my personal number because no one is at the office. Not that I mean anything by that. Or whatever. You know..." I returned my icy glare to the clock. Christ, I wished this was over.

John Sr. arrived with John Jr. John Jr. carried with him his two tiny fists. He was familiar with this circus and was ready. Looking warily around him at the decorations, the computers and the class pets, he sat down.

Five adults surrounded John Jr. He seemed to grow smaller and older the more they used words, terms and ideas he did not know. Cognitive Dissonance. Ceiling and basal scores. Measurable outcomes. It was a humiliating pounding futility. The school had called our bluff at actually attending the goddamned IEP meeting and we were bearing the full burden of the nonsense speak. In the beginning of the meeting, both John Jr. and Sr. looked at me for guidance as they signed random behavior contracts and agreements for evaluation. But as homelessness is often signing many severe looking documents for a changing cast of strangers, both Johns began gladly signing whatever was put in front of them.

John Sr. wanted his son in school, that's all. All these terms, 'behavior contracts,' 'measurable goals,' meant nothing to him.

"It looks like it didn't work too well for the kiddo at the last school," the principal said. "We're gonna change that."

"No, John Jr. You are" I said. I hated these people. I hated them because I had been one once and failed. I hated them because I knew they would talk about us when we left; conjecture, guesses about fetal alcohol... anything but a conversation about the joys of life and childhood; skinned knees and crushes. To have those discussions now you needed to stand outside of a shelter smoking. I knew they took inventory of John Sr.'s teeth. John Sr. knew it. This was a motherfucking 80's business power play, not a

welcoming of a child to a school. John Jr. looked at me with resignation. He was initiated into this shit show called adulthood.

John Jr. sat and all the adults in the tiny room sat and stared at him. This would be his one and only chance at the school for an actual adult's undivided attention. Not when he was in crisis, not when he was in a good mood and proud of something. Just this gunslinger standoff out of the blue in the early morning, would he have these adults' attention. They aimed some baby talk infantilizing questions that bounced off his icy veneer. I hated the Ugg boots the teachers were wearing, I hated their clean smell, I hated their sensible Target shawls, I hated their lack of simple honest humanity. And that hate made me feel good. It made me feel free. I hope John Jr. felt it too. He could do better than all of this. This school was going to be his bitch.

"Well, like it or not, John Jr. is here. And we are all going to just have to make this work. John Jr., this building, these lights, that damn frog in that tank over there. Those are all as much yours as any kid in this building. They're yours. You are going to have a house soon. You won't be able to go hang out with me at the day center all day. I know you like it there. There's food and women and your dad is there, that WAS your place. This is your place now." John Sr said.

John Jr. now began to cry. John Sr. began to cry too. I had something in my eye. I stared at the clock.

"I'll be here," John Sr. said. "I'll volunteer, I'll always be right near-by," John Sr. said looking at the teachers and principals. They seemed fakely enthusiastic about his added presence at the school. Thinking about it now, John Sr. knew he was fucking dying. He had to lie about the most fundamental promise a father can make; he'll be there.

Giggling and relieved, we burst out of the front doors of the building when the meeting was over. Driving to the restaurant, I knew the teachers were talking about us but it didn't matter. We were about to talk some shit about them over drinks and pancakes while those suckers worked their miserable jobs. John Jr. fell asleep in the restaurant booth. John Sr. and I had shots. I think all IEPs should end this way.

Sandy asked me for every detail the next morning. "I couldn't go. I'd have killed someone. I'd have killed the principal. Or I would have sat there not able to say anything and fucking cried." she said. "I shouldn't have gone," she argued with herself. "I shouldn't have gone because they can't rely on me to go every time... so I shouldn't have gone."

A few weeks after finally getting an apartment, John Sr. died. From time to time, Sandy sends me an audio clip of John singing "If you leave me now, You'll take away the biggest part of me." She got that house in West Virginia on a VA loan. She has chickens, cats and babies. There's no question John was the best part of many of us. I wish those crazy bastards working at the shelter during the day had gotten him that apartment months sooner. Maybe Sandy and I could have gone over there for drinks and play some video games with John Jr. And like all of the people I miss dearly, I can't remember the last time I saw him, all I can remember is everything he tried to tell me in breathy rambling voicemails that I ignored. It was his impossible wish of giving John Jr. to Sandy and I. Jerk.

3.

Tristan, a mighty pot bellied man with no teeth and a hernia protruding like a novelty belt buckle spent the first few weeks alone with his daughter Carmen, a girl who although far smaller than he, had more rage and power than Tristan could muster at his worst. And Tristan could brawl. Tristan liked to ask the staff, "Hey, what day is it?"

Staff would reply something like, "It's Tuesday."

Tristan's reply would be, "Thank God, I always smoke crack on Tuesday."

When Tristan and Carmen fought, which was often, Tristan would say, "Just wait till your mom gets out of detox."

Carmen's reply would be, "Why, she isn't going to do shit."

Tristan would say, "Yeah but I can hide behind her for a while."

One night Tristan, Carmen and a tall lady trudged in out of the cold around 11pm. Snow was falling again as evidenced by the drifts that had collected on their shoulders. All three seemed beat and went straight to bed, not bothering to beat the snow off themselves as they came in. I wondered if that was mom, fresh from detox. Wailing filled the halls from shelter guest Vana catheterizing her daughter. The auditorium was like one dying lung, with each collective cough an echo of crackles and a wheezes and a domino affect of sympathetic hacking. What little air there was funneled by our desks and out two tiny open windows. My co-worker Felix teetered a book

over his crossed legs, seemingly oblivious to this writhing mass of human suffering.

"What these poor people need is some god damned codeine cough syrup," I said.

"Why is that?" he answered like a cock-sucking middle class therapist.

"Because it helps you breathe when you are sick," I said.

"Why don't their doctors prescribe it?" he asked politically.

"Because doctors don't prescribe opiates to poor people any more," I said.

"Why don't they?" he said, putting his book down and focusing on the conversation, just as I was ready to abandon it.

"You must have read the news, they are clamping down on opiate prescriptions. Cough syrup is an opiate. It's the ONE mother fucking thing that helps when you have a chest cough. The one thing that could possibly make this fuck-hole survivable." I said.

"Aren't they just seeking other ways to manage pain?" Felix asked.

"No, Felix. They are not. If you read any of these discharge papers, or doctor's follow-ups they say get plenty of rest and take over the counter cold remedies. Last year when I was a teacher I got the codeine cough syrup twice. There is a quota to reduce opiate prescriptions and it's aimed directly at this homeless population," I had had this conversation before. It was well rehearsed.

"The codeine helped with sleeping?" he asked.

I didn't buy this naivitea anymore. His shaved head, denim jacket and torn jeans were too perfect. "You just smoke pot, don't you."

"Well, now, yes," he said.

"And you don't drink, however that begs the question, did you ever drink?" I asked.

"Yes." He was using honesty as a defense mechanism. I hated that.

"To the point that you felt it was hurting you or your family?" I wasn't sure where I was going with this. In fact I wasn't certain I was even sober.

"I didn't want to put them through any more," Felix said.

I frowned. I couldn't imagine him putting anyone through anything. He was so fucking clean. "Have you ever had codeine cough syrup?"

"Yes," he answered.

This was futile or he was winning or I had no idea what I was saying. He recrossed his legs and the catheterized child's wailing amplified as if somehow tied to the positioning of his hips. I had to get out of there.

A Coyote loped by the parking lot. I'm not kidding. In fact, there were three of them. They made eye contact as they bounced through the snow. The world was so quiet. The traffic lights reflected in the trees and softly off the snow. The sky was low and purple and big flakes fell and melted on my shoulders. I breathed nicotine through a cigarette and blew perfect smoke clouds.

I hadn't been gone more than fifteen minutes but shelter guest Catherine was filming shelter guest Butterfly when I returned to the lobby.

"She hit her child," Catherine said to her fictional audience. Butterfly reached for her and Felix stepped in between using the only language of social work that ever seemed to be effective in real life situations, "hay, wow, hay come on, hay."

Butterfly charged out into the snow, barefoot. I waited a second, then followed. Beneath the temple awning I found her, cold but not yet shivering. She had chemically dispelled her rage. There was a strong security light above us.

"It's like magic, you know. She keeps you looking at one thing to keep you distracted. She films people so they don't see the fuck-up shit she's doing. She's too high and mighty to be in the homeless shelter. I get it. It's a test. I've cut bitches like her before. I have, and they had it coming. She knows I have something coming too... she smells I have a warrant. I have to be stronger than that. I mean my name is Butterfly, I should be able to do this. Float on through. Float on through," she said looking at a tiny drop of blood on her arm. "Ali is in Kindergarten now. I sell papers. We're doing it. This is better than a van in California. I has to be. Whatever."

"Are you cold?" I asked her.

She smiled like the temperature was the farthest thing from her mind as should it be from mine. "No baby." She took my hand and placed it on her chest. From within her radiated heat. She looked me up and down. "Look

at you, you corney little fucker. You lost something and you are looking for it here. You lost something. It doesn't matter what. Because look at the grammar of the sentence. You lost something. That means it's lost. You aren't losing it, it's LOST. like a highway."

I couldn't say anything. The cold seemed heavy now and the snow was dangerous. I looked at her feet in the dirty snow.

"I can't tell. I can't tell what's next. I think that's why I am using again. I can tell what's happening, what I feel and will feel but not what's happening with life. I can't tell if that's good or bad." She took a deep breath, coughed a little and spit and began to walk back to the shelter.

"What calmed her down?" Felix asked as I returned to the lobby.

I was visibly calmer too, I could tell he wondered if we got fucked up together. "I think she just needed a second."

I noticed Carmen was awake, sneering at a notebook. I walked by her and she threw herself on top of it to cover it up. I quickly moved on. Felix sat in a sensible denim parka beneath a Star of David, reading the Nytimes Book review. He was a walking photography shoot for some pill designed to aid in low testosterone. Felix's and Carmens countenance struck a silly juxtaposition. Carmen holding a marker like an etching tool, her 9 year old fists looking brutal and able. Felix peered down at his publication about writing looking like Whistler's Mother. Felix sensed my critical glare and addressed Carmen.

"Are you doing homework?" Felix asked Carmen.

She sneered. "No."

"Are you writing a story?" he continued.

"No," she said with visible annoyance.

"Are you writing a death threat?" I asked.

"Maybe," she said. She squirmed and peered down at the page, then under her breath admitted, "I'm trying to write a song," then quickly made eye contact with us both to prove she could and would kill us both if we had a problem with it.

"What's it about?" Felix asked.

Carmen rolled her eyes. "If I knew that, I'd be done by now."

"When I write I try to just get some ideas out. Just jot down some words," Felix said.

"I don't want to jot down words. I want to write a song. Do you write songs?" She asked.

"No I don't, but Mike does," Felix said.

"I do," Mike said, rubbing his chin and adjusting his giant scarf in his reflection in the shelter window. I hadn't noticed him there. There were times I suspected the whole job was an elaborate DT hallucination.

Carmen too had an incredulous look. This conversation about the impossibility of communicating was infuriating her. What was the point of talking to these three ruined adults about the sadness and hollow irritation of writer's block? Frankly, the best way for Carmen to communicate these emotions was to physically assault Felix. But apparently Carmen liked us, or maybe just tolerated us enough to not assault us with her Crayola Markers, which in her hands obviously could cause grievous bodily harm.

John sr. tiptoed by, the way men in their fifties do when they have to pee late at night. "John, when you write a letter, how do you start?" Felix asked. I imagine John waking up and dreading going to the bathroom because of just such a question.

"I'm sorry, what?" he politely smiled and rubbed his eyes. Carmen surveyed us all.

"We were just talking about the best way to write a letter," Felix said.

"No you stupid fucking asshole, I'm trying to write a song," Carmen said through clenched teeth. Exhausted and confused, John's mouth hung open.

The Tall woman appeared, draped in a blanket, "Carmen honey, come to bed," she said. Carmen abandoned her markers and paper and scooted towards her without argument. John tiptoed away.

"Lets see it," Felix said, gesturing at what she had been working on.

I sat where she had been sitting, the bench was still warm. The desk was a mess of markers and pens. The desk itself had notes written on it, pictures etched into the grain. The paper she had been working on was perfectly white.

"Nothing there," I remarked.

"Hm," Felix said, writing some God Damned short story in his head. How dare he? I looked to Mike to make incredulous eye contact with him, but

realized he was gone. The child again wailed in the bathroom as if waking from a nightmare of being catheterized to being catheterized in real life.

"I don't know what to do about that. I'd send in a female staff but it's Sandy's day off and jesus. Does she know what she's doing? Jesus," I said.

Felix recrossed his legs and turned his body down the hall and peered at the women's bathroom. "I don't know, man. I mean, I understand your concern, however I'm not a doctor. But either is she. The people at the day center must have a relationship with her, ya know. Maybe write an email?"

"I have," I said.

"Emails..." Mike said skeptically, somehow sitting directly behind me. "Just want to touch base about some pain points, some problematic issues and details you may have overlooked in the google drive. Hey, lets touch base and collaborate! I'm super excited."

The child effectively communicated its discomfort again. We three sat in impotent silence for the rest of the night.

The morning exploded with accusations and screaming. Catherine was narrating problems with people's parenting for her documentary. Felix held his own, firmly making people make their way to the door. Mike had a strange way of listening to each family's unmeetable needs as he gently reminded them it was time to go. It was nearly impossible to not make a daily eviction traumatizing to the toddler army, but we tried. When the auditorium was almost empty we noticed Tristan and Carmen and the tall woman.

Tristan and Carmen loomed over their cot. I heard Tristan say low and dangerously, "Carmen I need you to wait for me by the front door." Carmen didn't budge. "Wake up Maria," Tristan said to Carmen's mother.

Carmen looked at me. I walked over to the cot, in terrified-robotic clarity. Tristan looked at me with searching fear. I looked down on Maria's face. It was pale. She did look like a giant Carmen. Her eyelids were purple, her gray mouth was open. I wasn't sure what to do. I knelt down to my knees next to the bed to get in position to feel for a pulse or check her breathing.

"Mom?" Carmen asked.

We three looked down at her, ashen, lovely, eternal.

I looked up at Tristan, towering above me, his gray face like rough statue commemorating grief.

I looked down again.

Maria's eyes opened, locked on mine and said, "who the fuck are you?"

Locking the temple doors the sun cut through the humid cold. You could tell the snow was going to melt, which disappointed my inner child. Mike and I were astonished to hear Felix agree to go to the bar as well. We walked in a pack like truant teenagers through the slush and run-off streams, over puddles and past faces from the shelter we knew.

Felix hummed an uncomfortable tune as a stranger and Mike argued about Phil Collins (of all fucking people). Those of us who drank were drunk quickly and all the merciful nonsense of morning TV news was gleefully fantastic. I thought of the casual cruelty of the toddlers, taking toys from each other in play rehearsal for adulthood. I ordered a shot of Jameson and left it on the bar in front of Felix while I stood to go to the bathroom. He seemed to appreciate this act of callous sadism. The whiskey was still there when I got back, but Felix had warmed it with his lecherous eyes. I hope I made that week's AA confessions. Mike knocked his pitcher over and I played video poker with money I stole from Felix. I wish I could write a song about that feeling. And this feeling is partly why people return to homeless shelters. It's so christ-fucking lonely out there. The worst enemies and best friends you could ever imagine having are at your local homeless shelter.

"Let us toast to animal pleasures, to escapism, to rain on the roof and instant coffee, to unemployment insurance and library cards, to absinthe and good-hearted landlords, to music and warm bodies and contraceptives... and to the "good life", whatever it is and wherever it happens to be."

— Hunter S. Thompson

The shelter was half empty. I had arranged to work doubles the week of Christmas and New Years. I had learned over the years the shelter was the place to ride out the cruel insincere sentimentality of the season; shocked exhausted and terrified people made for a good temporary family.

Christmas some years prior was when I lost my son, career and spent time in a shelter myself. And even though I claim to fucking hate christmas, here I am, essentially writing a book set on Christmas in homeless shelter. Also, the point of this book was to subtly allude to how the military experience is an accessible metaphor for the PTSD many of us live with from the various trauma's of our lives... Christmas being one of those traumas. Major holidays are times of forceful offensive measures; think of the Tet Offensive, the Yom Kippur war and my many divorces.

As I was saying... The shelter was half empty. A family had a vacation from homelessness when they were 'visiting for the holidays.' It was an exception to boundaries set by friends and families who couldn't be burdened by a homeless family except those few days around christmas when... I fucking hate Christmas. The shelter was half empty but that didn't stop the volunteers and other shelter workers from having elaborate breakdowns in the reception area when people didn't appreciate all they had done... the decorations, the quinoa, the hand knit scarves... Needless to say, nearly the entire holiday shift I spent hiding, smoking in the parking lot with the shelter guests who couldn't stand the shelter until the lights were turned out.

As Mike rambled on about his childhood, I thought about my own. The two narratives combined into a white noise of self pity, a sort of back-of-the-brain hum, akin to the sound of the gin pickling your cerebellum. A car drove slowly by, throbbing bass and it was Christmas and we couldn't help but dance; indeed if we stopped moving our feet, they'd freeze in the snow. So in place we trotted, drank and whined and smoked for fifteen dollars an hour outside of a half empty emergency family shelter. Mike ran out of things to say and depression threatened to invade our moods from the fringes of our silence. Luckily Ron and Janet shuffled up, joined at the hip like one strange ancient piece of machinery, their cigarettes tiny exhaust pipes. They usually arrived very late, there was less chance anyone asked where their daughter was. As if she wasn't better off somewhere else. That has to be one of the most fucked up requirements that shelter had. You must show a valid human child to enter. You cannot experience this hell alone, you must bring your child. No, your child can't spend a few days with grandma while you figure things out, doing so puts you at risk of dying in a snowbank. The shelter was half empty.

"Fucking Jesus fucking Christ," Ron declared with a slur. He resembled a tiny messiah himself, had he done heroin for 25 years on the streets of Portland. "Those bitches won't leave us the God-Damned alone."

"They told my daughter she was too young to smoke. Aren't I the cock sucking judge of that?" Janet said. Ron and Janet seemed to face some non-existent fire as the snow and rain accumulated on their hoodies. They were in good spirits. They loved to bitch. So do I! We had that in common. It was a Christmas miracle. "The one, the ballet dancer, she's gonna get it. The bitch thinks she holds the God Damned keys to the prison. I don't understand if you hate people so God Damned much, why the fuck do you work with them," Ron continued.

I saw a wristband from an ER visit on Ron. "Did you go to the ER?" I asked.

"Fuck. I went in because my feet are swollen, my heart is racing and the mother fuckers said to come back if I was getting light headed. Well, I did what they said and I get back there and the mother fuckers tell me to quit smoking. Is that what they get paid all that money for? Fuck, can I open a little shop and bill the fucking christ out of people to tell them to stop smoking? Fucking mother fucker comes in with a gunshot wound and I act like a prick and tell them to quit smoking. I could be dead right now, but those pricks at the ER wouldn't care. They think they are saving lives by deciding who gets... medical attention and who gets a cute little lecture... on mother fucking smoking. I hate it... HATE it when people exploit technicalities to be judgemental" Ron testified with impressive clarity, his grammar guided by rage.

"Shit," continued Janet, while Ron inhaled. "Remember last Christmas? You had the heart infection and they wouldn't treat you? What the fuck did you do?" She turned to face me now. Both of their moods were becoming increasingly euphoric, either affected by the righteousness of their stance or influenced by some other chemical agent. "Ron gets in a fight with an ER nurse because he was sick last year too... We storm out, we go back on the hill but he goes to sleep. Fucking like two days or some shit, I don't know. It's raining and fucking mud are pouring down the hill..."

"Yeah two days. Janet it was four fucking days you cunt. You left me..."

"Fuck you, I'm not going to watch you sleep for four fucking days. I got shit to do..."

"You left me, you brutal cunt..." Ron said.

"Anyway, so he says I'm not feeling well, screams he can't breathe. Nothing I do is working and we know the hospital is worthless. That's a weird fucking feeling when the hospital won't see you. It's like you are fucking in fucking outerspace or some shit. A guy named Courtney is this junkie in the next tent and Ron tells me to go get Courtney's big syringe. What the fuck? Ok, I get the big fucker. No sooner do I hand it to Ron than he pushes that thing into his own chest. He then sucks out some fluid and then relaxes. I was like... fuck," said Janet.

"Fluid around the heart. I was in a fuck ton of pain. When they showed me that EKG I took some mental notes you know. I felt so much fucking better though. I shoulda told myself to quit smoking and sent myself a million dollar doctors bill." Ron said, grinning by the light of his cigarette, the coal illuminating the ridges and wrinkles on his face.

"That's not the end, no. This is when the story gets weird as fuck," Janet said.

"Oh here's when the weird shit starts," Mike asked. "The syringe to the heart was the normal part of the story and now the strange and improbable part of the story begins..."

"Yes, listen fuck face. Courtney's propane tank exploded." Janet said.

"The second I got that puss out from around my heart, Janet screams, get Up! Get up! Run! Run!" It was like Vietnam. Propane exploding and shooting off into the sky. Trees lit up, shadows flying through the forest like a thousand mother fuckers were running with us. I could almost see the mother fucking Hueys in the sky, spraying bullets and napalm. Gorgeous. Absolutely gorgeous. I couldn't stop fucking laughing..."

"He was, he was cracking up as we watched the park burn. Like ten fire engines..." she said, folding into Ron's hoodie. "And I remembered I had turned Courtney's propane lantern on to find the needle." She was speaking softly now, the climax of the Christmas story having been reached, "I killed that mother fucker. And I that's when I realized what my life's purpose was. I'm going to kill you Ron. Someday."

"Yup..." Ron said romantically.

"I am gonna be the one who kills you. Might be with a gun, I might strangle you, but you are going out by my hand. My hand. I fucking love you that much," Janet said. There was nothing more to be said as those adorable old folks kissed on Christmas Eve as a light snow fell outside the temple. I glanced at Mike and felt sad that I had no desire to torture or kill him. Squeezing him by the neck until he stopped talking about New Jersey seemed like hard work. We stamped out our last cigarettes and headed inside the half full shelter.

Self destruction, it's my nature- said the scorpion.

-Aesop

Amber had endured the initiation to being homeless. Despite seldom speaking she had become a focal point of shelter gossip. She heard her name but never looked up as she attended to her five year old Cody. As she was so silent and many of the residents of the shelter were perpetual gossip wheels, she sort of fell off my radar. One morning, past the time for leaving the shelter, I noticed she was still at the bottom of the stairs, staring at the ceiling, her child, stroller and various items surrounding her.

"Is there anything I can get you," I said as a passive aggressive reminder of the time, my blood alcohol levels becoming dangerously low..

She slowly looked down and briefly met my gaze. Her eyes were red. She was much younger than me, she seemed to have baby fat cheeks. Last week's makeup made martian canal tracks down her chin. She was aware of the time, she raised her arm to show me her watch, then let her arm fall to her side. "I don't know," she said.

"Can I help you lift your stroller?"

"No," she said, then "yes." She wouldn't look at the stroller as if doing so would make her cry.

I grabbed a leg of the stroller and the whole thing seemed to come apart in my hands. I recognized it as one of the recent donations, discarded day after day amongst the other treasures donated. For a stroller to not immediately be snapped up, it must have massive structural failures.

"I threw the old one away because I was afraid I had too much stuff," she she sort of weezed. She took a deep shuddering breath. "And I saw people getting warnings for having too much stuff and I thought I had too much so I threw the old one away... then I realized I needed one and I took this stroller because it was the only one. I should have known they wouldn't leave one behind if there wasn't anything wrong with it. I was stupid but now I have no stroller and I have to get to his grandma's house and she knows something is up and...." she murmured out like a mumble rapper over a beat of her own gasps, then finally melted into gasping tears.

I tried to reassemble the thing. It was complex like a M. C. Escher drawing. Parts seemed like they would fit, but when attached they popped off again almost as if the beast realized you were trying to fix it. It was fucking tired, it didn't want to play anymore. I stood up straight to ponder the problem. I too realized it was hopeless. We both stared at it as Cody flew a tiny toy plane at arm's length. Our attention fell on him for a stunned moment, then he dropped his plane and looked up at us. Between the plane crash and our faces, and the palpable aura of crisis in the room, he began crying.

"I mean, do you need everything here?" I asked, looking at the diaper bag, purse and heavy blanket on the stroller, knowing full well she did. If she ditched the child, she would probably be ok.

"No," she concluded and started stacking the things she obviously still needed on the floor next to us. In a large pile now sat the blanket, diaper bag and her purse. She picked up two of the items fine, then managed to pick up her purse with her teeth and turned to walk up the stairs and realized she didn't have her child.

"What's the riddle about the scorpion and the frog?" I mused out loud, hoping remembering the story would give me a clue as to how to fix the

situation. I then vaguely remembered the frog and scorpion both drown, so I decided to abandon the subject.

"It's my third day at work and I know they all know. I mean I smell like a fucking homeless shelter. They know and I don't fucking sleep," Cody was still crying as she said this as if to accentuate the finer points of the story.

I tried to swoop up Cody with the intention of flying him like a plane, but his foot got caught in the stroller, causing it to collapse with his foot still in it. My playful gesture reassembled more an act of desperate child abuse. I tried to maneuver the child under my arm while fiddling with his foot and bear trap stroller. I finally freed him then hoisted him up in the air. He seemed to smirk for a moment, suspended in the air above me. I saw clearly as if in slow motion a snot laden tear fell from his face into my eye. I nearly dropped him trying to wipe my eye with my shoulder. I have a deathly fear of pinkeye. You should too.

"Here, let's go to the top of the stairs," Amber said, trying to take charge however moving her mouth caused her to drop her purse. It fell to the floor with a 'plop' then vomited its contents on the ground. Amber seemed to be carrying a number of round items that day and they all rolled away as if part of some cruel game of tag. She knelt down and attempted to collect the items.

I carried Cody to the top of the stairs at arm's length. He maintained eye contact with me while chewing on his plastic disease covered plane. Now atop the stairs, we looked down in pity at the abandoned stroller and his mother inspecting stray pieces of garbage on the floor to make sure they weren't hers. I put the child down and he ran back down the stairs to his mother.

"Now we're getting somewhere," I said sarcastically, reaching for her blanket and diaper bag. She grabbed them and didn't let go. I guided her back up the stairs using the blanket as a leash.

When we reached the top, she looked scared again. "I forgot his medicine," she mumbled, holding her purse in her teeth again. The child wrapped himself around her knees, like the shackles of the massive anxiety attack she was having.

"I'll get it." I bounded down the steps and was at her bunk, realizing too late it was potentially as bad a violation of one's privacy as one could make.

"It's in the pink bag," she called, causing her purse to drop from her mouth again. "It's an eye dropper." There was now a cold reluctant tone in her voice. I could almost feel her floating in the room above us.

I tenderly opened the zipper on the bag and exposed intimate cleaning products, underwear and diarrhea pills. I knew she was watching and it caused me to begin to sweat profusely. I found the dropper and bounded back up the stairs to her.

She put down what she was carrying and firmly grabbed Cody's chubby cheeks so he was looking up at her. She then dropped a few drops from the bottle into his eyes causing him to explode in toddler rage. The medicine seemed to calm Amber though. I took the bottle from her.

"Should I put this back," I said.

"Um yes, can you please?" she asked.

Bouncing down the stairs I read that the medicine was indeed for pink eye, which naturally made my eyes explode in fluid and a burning sensation as I remembered Cody's wet drips in my beautiful virgin eyes. Now things were so terrible I had the giggles.

"What if we get you to your car, if your stuff is in your car, will you need your stroller?" I offered.

She nodded and turned towards the exit. I wrestled with the door for a while, finally closing it behind us, the lock firmly clicking. Outside in the cold air we re adjusted our loads. I held half her baby blanket and diaper bag as if I were mugging her in slow motion. Her child wrapped around her knees and her purse was back in her mouth. This poor creature needed a goddamn drink though inviting her out to one at this juncture probably would raise ethical red flags. So in my mind I invited myself out to drink. 'Hey Patrick, want to go get a drink after this?' 'Sure asshole, I thought you'd never ask.' I saw neither she nor the child had a coat. I gave her a cocky look then turned to run in and grab them. The locked door stopped me.

"It's ok," I said. "Mike will grab them." I fished my phone out of my pocket and typed to my coworker Mike.

"Locked out." I typed.

"Locked in," he replied. Mike had an amazing disability. He was medically incapable of answering or acknowledging a direct line of questions.

"Seriously, can you open the front door?" I typed. Condensation appeared in the air around Amber and Cody from their trauma breathing. We looked like we were on a family on a smoke break outside the shelter. Or maybe like we were having a run of the mill marital argument. A woman walking a dog sneered at us as she walked by.

The ‘user is typing,’ sign came on my phone. I watched the stupid little symbol bounce for thirty seconds and remembered it was hopeless. A story about New Jersey was being composed by Mike. Some infinitely quirky reminiscence from his childhood would appear in fifteen minutes. “Hey, let’s get to the car, get the heater running and then when Mike opens the door I’ll run in and get the coats.”

She trudged forward. In the morning grass hundreds of footprints marked the daily morning diaspora from the shelter, which is a pretty witty metaphor for a story set in a jewish Temple.

I heard Amber faintly talking to herself. This was her first time being homeless and I was witnessing the first real breakdown. I tried to keep any further witty comments to myself as I again considered who was the frog and who was the scorpion in this situation. It was obvious who was drowning. The baby blanket began to drag on the ground and Cody stepped on it and face planted on the filthy concrete. Amber dropped what she was carrying and knelt behind him, burying her face in his cheap donated clothes, gasping for strength. Someone slowly drove by making the correct assumption that I was abusing them. Cody’s wailing filled the acoustics of the narrow street between the temple and the next door apartments. Somewhere on the fourth floor of the apartment, someone abruptly closed their window. The two knelt on the sidewalk beneath me, I felt profoundly tall and useless, like another suburban tree. A tree no one ever played on. No swings dangled from me, no heart was carved in my belly. It occurred to me in many of the apartments above, many of them... there were empty couches, video game systems and cute pets. How different Amber and Cody’s life would be if someone just said, ‘hay, chill up here for a few weeks.’ That wasn’t going to happen.

I picked up the baby blanket, the diaper bag and put her purse in my mouth, pausing to violently rub my eyes and peer at distant objects to confirm my vision was getting cloudy. We resumed our trek to the parking lot.

“Fuck,” she said.

“You better have your god damned keys,” I said too abruptly.

“The dome light is on.” She quickly unlocked the minivan, got behind the wheel and turned the key. Nothing happened. She then stared directly at the horizon in front of her as Cody wriggled away and wandered crying toward the street.

“Where’s his coat,” someone offered some great parenting advice as they jogged by. I scooped Cody on my shoulder, fearing every wet smear on his little body.

I fumbled with the trunk as he writhed on my shoulder, landing a few good blows in my eye socket with his little snot coated toddler-hammer knee. "Can you unlock it?" I asked, then listened for the click.

"It doesn't, it stopped..." Amber said, "you probably shouldn't." she held the keys out. I walked to the front and took them, Cody attempting to crawl down my back. I got the trunk open to reveal a nest of blankets, bags of household items and clothes. I moved a bag which fell over in a liquid mess of baby pictures. Rummaging in the corners of the van I found the jumper cables nestled next to a knife, pepper spray and a pink taser.

"I found an ounce of weed," John suddenly appeared under the trunk door next to me, a blissful level of stoned on his kind old face. He held out a shopping bag, dripping with snow and rain. Inside was a primordial muck of weed. It stank.

"Where's his coat," another helpful Portlander remarked as they disgustedly walked by, no doubt noticing John's bag of drugs while a half nude toddler tried desperately to escape my hold. Cody's tiny hands grabbed my love handles, pinched and twisted, his tiny toddler finger nails serving their evolutionary defensive purpose.

"Good Morning Amber," John grinned at Amber as if to rub in the absurdity of the situation, then he stumbled off in the direction of the bar. My bar.

I surveyed the situation and realized in order to get a jump I'd have to back the van into the middle of the parking lot. The Cody's grip was now serving as a kind of permanent attachment and once Amber had the van in neutral, I managed to roll the van backwards with only minimal damage to my shins. She popped the hood and I attached the cables in the universal sign of distress. Then we waited.

"Where's your son's coat," some asked as they pulled up.

Soon we had the van running and Cody in his child's seat. All the pieces assembled of what was left of her life, Amber seemed better. If only her day consisted of struggling to her van though, she had an endless litany of similar tragedies to face over the next 12 hours before she could return to our hell hole shelter. She took a deep breath and looked in the rear view mirror to back away.

"Where's your son's coat?" Mike said grinning behind a cigarette. He had both their coats.

"Thank you so much, I don't know what I would have done without you," Amber said to Mike. She did, she said that to Mike, not me.

John ambled up behind us. I looked at my phone and read a reminicance about New Jersey from Mike while shaking my head in disbelief. Amber drove away. I put away my phone and violently rubbed my eyes.

The obvious answer was booze is the scorpion, I thought, swirling Ouzo in a shot glass at the Marathon Taverna Bar and Grill on Burnside. Or I was the scorpion. Or life is a frog murdering scorpion (I am perfectly aware of the ambiguity of that last sentence). No wonder people went fucking crazy while being homeless. Mike and John peered into their reeking giant sack of weed. As I rubbed my psychosomatically burning eyes I thought, at least I got to be a father again for a little while. The booze trickled down my throat, through my spine and the warmth filled my fingers and made its way to my disease ravaged retina. I reread Mike's New Jersey reminicance text. It was about how he needed to find John because there was a letter waiting for him at the day center. Apparently John again had gotten the fake promise of housing from his case worker and we were celebrating (whatever celebrating means). 'At least I got to be a father again for a little while,' I said aloud to the bar, the home of the scorpion. Later, drunk, I walked into the shelter and dosed myself with Cody's eye drops. The day staff looked disgusted and shocked. Fuck them. She thanked Mike, not me.

Look at the night and it don't seem so lonely  
We filled it up with only two  
And when I hurt  
Hurting runs off my shoulders  
How can I hurt when holding you

Neil Diamond

The man's facial hair had some deep personal meaning. He had a long neck beard and a perfect mustache. Behind him he dragged a rolling suitcase whose wheels were almost worn off. Although in his 70s, he still had an obvious weight and health to him. He often talked to himself as if he were on the verge of reasoning out several great intertwined mysteries. It was about 3am when he stopped into the men's shelter with a piece of paper rolled into a scroll.

"Young man, may I use the fax machine," he asked. The shelter office had a great many office apparatus, it seemed like the least we could do was in the name of our anti-homeless cause was let an actual homeless person use one of these apparatus.

"Be my guest," I said, unlocking the office door. 3am was a good time for such personal favors. Also, despite the lines of tents outside, the shelter was half empty and I saw no harm in starting a relationship with the man that could lead to him using one of our beds, maybe rest his weary bones and worn suitcase wheels. "Where are we faxing it to?"

"I have the number here," Tod said, opening his bag. He produced stacks of notebooks, bibles, library books and pornography. He put them in stacks on the floor, tumbling through pages he had scrawled on, looking for the correct number.

"Maybe I can look up the number," I asked.

Tod looked at me with a gleam of friendship in his eyes.

"You young guys are really amazing with those machines. I bet you can. I bet you can type in the question and get the information I need. That would be great. I could really get somewhere finally. I am looking for Bill Gates. He owes me money," Tod said, matter of factly.

"Well," I began, "Does Bill Gates owe you money, or does one of his companies? I think maybe there is a contact form for vendors, maybe a business number we can track down."

"Well, see, that's a good question. I have a grant I need to access, I have funds in an account," Tod said, rescuing the scenario from the improbable.

"Oh, well, there are many grants funded by the Melinda Gates Foundation," I said. "Do you remember what the name of the grant was?" I asked.

"Why yes," Tod said. "Yes I do. I have it written down here," he resumed going through his stack of papers. Between the bibles, the porn and the ER discharge papers, he had quite a cross section of the human psyche. "You see, I have money in an account for housing that Bill Gates put there. I am

actually quite important, I don't want to brag or anything. But if I can just get these last few details figured out, I can make you very rich."

I had found a web page that listed some homeless charities sponsored by the Gates foundation. I read a few names, "NPI, Making Changes, Home Connections," I listed a few.

Tod listened to the names, "Sure, let's fax them," he said.

"Ok, what do you need to fax?" I said, clicking on the 'contact' page for each organization and jotting a few fax numbers down. I'll admit I was trying to placate him, but I have always used the approach with social work of throwing shit at a wall and seeing what sticks. I had no doubt there was some truth in what Tod was saying, some kernel where the idea grew from and perhaps I could work my way back to it.

"Well, I got it right here, see," Tod unrolled his piece of paper and smoothed it out. I examined it. It was the handwritten lyrics to Sweet Caroline by Neil Diamond.

I looked at it for a moment. "Can I put your name and phone number on it?" I asked, "so they know how to get in touch with you?" I was trying to figure out his name.

"Well, they'll know," Tod said, beaming. "I wrote that, they'll recognize that. You should hear my daughter sing it. It makes kings and queens drop to their knees and cry."

"I honestly love that song, that whole album is fire," I said. "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show."

"So you know! You know what's happening then! And my daughter can make the angels cry when she sings. The heavens open and the angels weep," Tod said, a tear rolling down his cheek. You know I was in the Army?"

"I did not know that," I said. "What was your name?"

"I enlisted in, lets see... 1960.... 1964. I had gotten into some trouble and the judge said it was probably the best idea," Tod said, taking his lyrics back and smoothing them again..

"What kind of trouble did you get into?" I asked.

Todd looked at me for a moment, somewhat scared, as if I knew what trouble he got in and was making fun of him. "Well, you know. There was a girl involved. But I loved her," he said.

"Oh, that kind of trouble," I said.

"But you do you see? The judge will know me, if I can get the money and give it to my daughter, everything will be fine," Tod said. "My name is Tod," he said finally, blinking in my direction.

My own father was known to walk around downtown, rambing about Jehovah's witnesses and pedofiles in power. With him it was a matter of letting him speak for a while. It seemed once all the words had come out and were heard, he was himself again. Having just met Tod, I wasn't sure where he ended and the fantasies began. "Where does your daughter live?"

"I have it written down here," Tod said and resumed going through his papers.

"I am going to fax this, but I am going to put my name and phone number on the top just in case they don't know how to get in touch with you," I said. "Can you sign your lyrics?"

"Why?" he said suspiciously.

"That's what artists do," I said.

"Well, I don't want to commit to anything," Todd said.

"Can I write, written by..."

"Todd Diamond," he said.

I wrote his name at the bottom and showed him. His wet eyes didn't focus on the paper. At his age he probably had a strong prescription for glasses and those glasses were long gone. Judging by his rough hands and scared face, they glasses had died bravely in battle.

"Ok, young buck. You do what you think is best. I am going to get my daughter's address," Tod said.

I faxed the lyrics to a few Gates funded non profits. The machine dialed and sang it's static song to a fax machine probably buried in some multi million dollar building outside Seattle. The things man invents to accomplish nothing are amazing. Duchamp and his artful Da Da apparatuses had nothing on the performance art Todd and I were performing.

"I can't find her number, I think they stole it," Tod said.

"What is her name?" I asked. He told me and I googled it. She had no social media profile, but there were a number of addresses in nearby states indicating she moved a lot. I read a few of the addresses aloud.

"That's her, that's her!" Tod said. "We'd better not bother her, she's busy. Probably has to work tomorrow on some big projects."

I wondered if she was hiding from him. There was no way to know. There were no phone numbers listed to even try. But I was digging deep into the mysteries of Tod and it seemed a shame to not try to contact her. This sweet old man didn't have to die alone on the streets. I felt I would have far better luck contacting her than cold calling a VA case worker. I lucked out... on an old Craigslist ad she had left an email. "Well lookie here, I think I found her. What do you want to say to her?" I said, pulling up a blank email.

"Well, we probably shouldn't bother her," Tod said.

"How often do you talk to her? She might like a sentence or two asking how she is... you know, just checking in" I said.

"Well, let me see now, it's been a year or two. Or maybe longer. I think I made her mad," Tod said. "You know how dads sometimes make their daughters mad? I think I did that."

I stared at my empty email for a moment. I was intrigued by the woman who made angels cry with her rendition of Neil Diamond songs. "Are you sure you don't want to say hi?" I asked.

Tod pulled the keyboard away from me, quite forcefully. It tore loose from the computer. He took a few steps back and held it like a weapon. He made wild eye contact with me, his eyes bulging, attempting to scan detail in the fog. I wasn't afraid. Not because of some enlightened or macho power I had; I genuinely didn't care if he hit me. I'd been hit a few times before. It was kind of nice, actually, to feel something now and again.

A moment passed with Tod breathing heavily at the peak of some rage. Then, almost as if he had to sneeze, his mood changed back. He examined the keyboard for a moment, then put it on the floor amongst his other documents. "If I can get in touch with the Gates people, I can get this all straightened out," he said.

"Well, I faxed them, I put my phone number here so if I hear anything, I will let you know. Do you want a bed for tonight?" I asked.

"Here? Oh no, no thankyou. I wouldn't stop here," Tod said, indignant. "I tell you what, in a few hours the coffee place opens on 2nd and the young woman who works there, she and I are friends. You should come meet her." Tod began packing away his papers, bibles, porn and my keyboard.

"That does sound nice," I said. I was familiar with the place and it's inventory. They didn't have booze so I had absolutely no intention of meeting him there.

"Oh see," Tod said, pointing out the window. Police lights were illuminating the street and shining through the tents. "I should be moving on, I have things to do tonight," Tod said. Tod groped at his papers on the floor, stuffing them back in his suitcase. He left a good portion of his papers, bibles and porn on the floor when he left, dragging his suitcase behind him. He had managed to collect my keyboard and its chord hung out of the suitcase, following him like an obedient puppy. His musty odor lingered. I made a stack of his papers to give to him should he return. I went through them, they looked like a lot of shelter writing I had seen before. Dates, names, sentences in quotes. He had an obvious love for his

daughter, and from what he told me, we all should love her. I could picture Tod napping in some doorway, smiling at the memory of her daughter singing for angels, kings and queens. I watched out the window as he disappeared down the street, suitcase in tow. Now I had a memory of Tod to add to the papers, bibles and pornography that fill my own head. I stole the keyboard of the daytime case manager and pulled up Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show on the internet. Fuck, that whole album is fire.

Arial

“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the clouds of war, it is humanity hanging on a cross of iron.”  
— Dwight D. Eisenhower

My new girlfriend made a valid point; maybe I should look for a form of employment that didn't make me vomit while I got ready for work. Stress puking was something I had gotten used to however I could see how it could seem distressing to a newcomer. I wiped my mouth off with my sleeve and thought it over while staring at the ruined primate in the mirror. I could try something drastically different; perhaps something with hammers and tape measures. Maybe I could wear a hard hat and reference a clipboard while making important calls on a cell phone. As I strained and dry heaved I considered the shape of the toilet bowl; a piece of perfect engineering and mass produced flawlessly, brought to the American market via coordination of salesmen, truckers and global logistics. Finally installed in this drywall prison of an apartment by some licensed plumber with decades of experience. Surely there was some part of the toilet industry I could be a part of. I brushed my teeth and kissed my girlfriend good-bye for the night and dry-heaved my way to work.

Later at work I discovered the public toilet on the premises was truly stopped up this time. I had used the trash grabber to fish the syringes and toilet paper out, but the plunger was no match for what was hidden further

down the pipe. It was the toilet next to the dining room where three meals a day were served; maybe it wanted to die. The primordial sludge bubbled and rocked indifferently in the bowl.

My hands on my hips, I considered how these work skills could translate to another job. I was trying to fix the toilet for a few reasons; firstly no one else would try to fix this toilet, it was the worst toilet in the worst bathroom in America. Secondly I appreciated the need for this particular toilet. There were maybe 100 people camped directly outside and their occasional access to a toilet was important and... also there came a celebrity-like status from unclogging this toilet. It occurred to me, I liked the community. I liked the notoriety. I needed this toilet as much as it needed me. As grumpy and misanthropic as I liked to believe I was, what good was being grumpy and misanthropic if there was no one around to see it? I needed the toilet to make me grumpy and the toilet needed me to clear its throat.

The toilet gradually accepted the snake, but it still did not drain. The fan in the bathroom had long ago been dismantled in some desperate drug search. I needed a break for air. I stepped outside onto the shelter porch. The street was alive with chatter, lights flickered in tents, dogs barking and music booming from bluetooth speakers. A police car rolled slowly by and a crescendo of cat calls followed it. I understood this power dynamic. 9am-5pm the social service lipservice machine was in control here. But at 5pm the case managers, the directors, the grant funded programs all packed up and went home and mayhem took control again. Or the mayhem was always in control and the case managers, the directors and the grant funded programs were guests on behalf of the cruel growing vortex. But at 5pm the growling mayhem took over. The honest, beautiful growling mayhem.

Charles limped up the sidewalk. He still had chubby childish features that betrayed his age. Months earlier he was probably trading Magic the Gathering Cards. Now he was trying to offset his youthful features with homemade (tent-made?) terrible face tattoos. He had burned me too many times, I was immune to his promises of going to Job Corp or enlisting in the military. He had arrived at the shelter and sold a story of profound victimization to each new staff member as they cycled through. Kicked out of the shelter, his face and body were aging a year for every month he spent in a tent out front, not eating or drinking water, doing meth and getting his ass kicked regularly.

"Can I use the bathroom?" Charles asked

"No, It's broken," I said.

"When are you actually going to get that shit fixed?" he asked.

"I am working on it, Charles. I needed a break from dry heaving. 'Working,' it means exchanging services and time for money, you might want to write that down," I said.

"Fuck you man, did you hear what Five did to me?" Charles said.

"Did the police harass you at your place of work?" I asked.

"Naw, dog. Out here at my home," he said.

The meth would rewire Charles' brain soon and self directed sustainable employment would be out of the question. Or maybe it was too late. Or maybe that had never been an option. "Did they offer you a job?"

"They tried to go in my tent," Charles said.

"I don't believe it," I said.

"They did, ask anyone," he said.

"I don't believe you have a tent. It's yours? Where did you get it?" I said.

"I traded for it," Charles said.

When I first met Charles I convinced him to get back on his meds after speaking to mom in the parking lot. She cried and stood with her body half in her car as Charles paced like an animal and threatened to kill her. She insisted he was a good boy on his meds. He threw a Mtn. Dew bottle full of piss at her. It made a heavy thunking sound as it bounced off the hood. Its contents sloshed and spun like the atmosphere of some distant planet's ammonia based atmosphere. He scanned the bushes for another bottle of piss, many were to be had. She drove off. I got Charles in the work van and drove him to the pharmacy. I was expecting antipsychotic medication but what he got were amphetamines for ADHD. I'm no doctor, but I didn't see

the merit in that. Using facebook and a cracked dirty smartphone, he had the pills sold before he got out of the van back at the shelter. "What did you trade for a tent?" I asked.

"A phone," Charles said.

"Where did you get the phone?" I asked,

"I found it," Charles said. "Seriously, I'm going to shit my pants," Charles said while dancing.

"No, it's clogged," I said.

"Let me in to use the upstairs bathroom," Charles said.

"I did that last week, you got your ass kicked," I said. It was true. I don't know what happened but I heard a commotion, and found Charles face down, a shelter guest's knee on his neck.

"Bro, that won't happen," Charles said.

"I know it wont because I'm not letting you in... unless you go to Jobcorp or The Army" I said.

I'm going to shit right here on the steps," Charles said.

"I'm sure you are," I said.

"I'm serious, I'm going to do it." he said.

"Write your name with shit. Can you spell your name?" I asked.

"Fuck you," Charles said. Most tent shitting was done in bags and heaved over a high fence and down an embankment. I don't think Charles actually had to shit, he was just making conversation. Or he was hiding in plain sight. Often deals went bad and scores were settled in the shadows. Next to me, under the streetlamp, he had some protection.

We both heard the gravely nonsensical calls of Greg as he wandered up the sidewalk behind us. Greg looked like a school bus driver. Bald, smiling...

he seemed out of place in his torn dirty sweat pants wandering the city endlessly howling. "Look, it's you in 6 months," I said to Charles.

"Fuck you," Charles said at almost a whisper. Perhaps this had already occurred to Charles and there was a glimmer of hope for him yet.

As Greg approached we could see he was holding his shoulder. At first I thought he was cold and maybe I could offer him a sweater. But as the light from the street lamp illuminated him I saw he was clutching a wound. His hand was red and the blood was flowing. Greg was laughing.

"Greg. Sit down," I said forcefully. "I'm going to call an ambulance." Greg laughed a nonsensical response and sat.

"Damn, fool, what did you do?" Charles asked, elated.

I threw my cigarette and walked up the steps to the office. While going through my keys I glanced back to confirm Greg was still sitting. He wasn't. He was directly behind me, leaning in for a kiss. His face was bloody from where he had touched it. I had just enough time to kick backwards and move him back. I opened the heavy shelter door, and Charles slipped in while I was distracted with Greg's continued unwanted affection. Greg giggled gleefully and blood streamed down his teeth.

"I'm just gonna shit and be right back," Charles said, disappearing down the corridor.

"Fuck you Charles," I said walking backwards as Greg followed me, bloody hands out, snickering and seeking a hug.

"Bro you're popular," Charles called from somewhere deep in the shelter.

I managed to close the office door behind me, Greg put his bloody hands on the glass and played with the smears he made.

"911, what is your emergency?" the operator said.

"I have a man with what looks like a stab wound on his shoulder..." I began.

"You have him with you? We've had so many calls... Can you keep him with you until paramedics can get there?" the operator said.

"I can try," I said and put the receiver on the table. ER dispatchers always had a litany of followup questions and advice I wasn't in the mood for.

Looking out through the bloody office door window, I couldn't see Greg anymore. I edged the door open and scanned the hall. I heard him giggling somewhere down the hall. I cursed myself for never having changed the overhead fluorescent bulbs. They flickered and buzzed and made my pursuit seem more ill-fated. I followed his noises and smeared blood drops on the floor. I peered in the dark corners under the stairwell and into the dark bathroom. I checked each stall by the light of my phone. In that low light it was hard to tell dirt and missing paint from blood. Finally I found him by the back door of the shelter. Against shelter rules, shelter guest Arial had the door propped open and was smoking. Arial was a 6'8 transgender woman with an amazing head of hair. Greg looked her up and down and put his arms out for a hug. Arial threw an extra large Baha Blast from Taco Bell in Greg's face. The blue liquid mixed with the blood and ran purple and gray down his face and hands. The ice clattered to the floor and spread in every direction. Arial stormed out the door, howling indictments. The icy soda to the face seemed to sober Greg. He slid to the floor and craned his neck to stare into the wound on his shoulder. It looked like a second mouth while it gurgled blood. Greg squeezed it and made it mouth the gibberish Greg whispered. We both stared into the gash for a while until the front door bell awakened us from the trance.

The paramedics had been looking for Greg. In Greg's own way he had been looking for help, stumbling around downtown Bars and Convenience stores, terrifying tourists and leaving before the paramedics could arrive.

"I've been looking for this guy for hours, the calls started all the way out on 99th," an officer said. "There's a trail of blood from the bus mall out there to here. And probably fifty scared school kids and housewives. 'Glad that's over."

Greg must have lost a substantial amount of blood in his wandering as he gladly got on the gurney and they wheeled him onto the ambulance. I waved goodbye like a mother sending her kids off to school and lit a cigarette to think again about skills I might have that would translate to

other jobs. Someone out there, somewhere, needed someone who knew what Baha Blast and blood looked like. I was sure of it. And it probably wasn't Taco Bell.

Arial walked up as the ambulance drove away.

"Alright, kick me out," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"I just assaulted someone, I've been kicked out for less," she said.

"Didn't you see, that was Greg, covered in fucking blood, trying to hug me," I said while unlocking the front door "You saved my ass."

"Oh shit, I didn't see that at all. I just wanted to throw my drink in someone's face. Ha! I guess you owe me," she said.

We both heard someone yelling at Charles somewhere deep in the building.

"Is that Charles? I guess now I am going to get thrown out," Ariel said, making giant fists and storming after Charle's voice.

Over the sounds of Charle's howls I logged into Indeed.com to see who was hiring. The field of homelessness was booming. I was a bit overwhelmed. From shelter workers, case managers, advocates, managers, interventionists... the job descriptions were pages long. I scanned the jobs I wasn't qualified for. Truck drivers. That looked appealing. Getting far the fuck away from here. Big Dan came to mind. Big Dan silently haunted the shelter for months. He had been working on some sort of program with the VA to get his CDL. He had a million hurdles to jump first. He was behind in his child support, had to go to court for a DUI, had to spend a week in a trucking academy. Finally he disappeared one day. We all hoped he was far away, eyes trained on the horizon as he piloted a semi full of Amazon garbage from some exotic city to another. Big Dan could be baited into a conversation by discussing ballistics. Often he stood in trance, staring far off into the sea of tents.

If asked what he was thinking about he said, "I'm correcting for atmospheric conditions to get a headshot on that guy there," and pointed

with his cigarette at someone like Charles or Greg on the street. I peered out the shelter window at people moving in between tents.

Ariel appeared carrying Charles like a cat by his collar. "Jesus Christ Patrick, do you just let anyone in here?"

"Maybe he snuck in through the back door Ariel, I hear people prop open that door to smoke," I said sarcastically.

"I don't want this little shit, stealing my shit," said Ariel, still holding Charles. "I put up with enough shit already."

"Fuck you, I don't want any of your queer shit," Charles said.

Ariel casually shook Charles, "I'm going to take out the trash," Ariel said and turned to leave, Charles in tow. However she slipped on Gregs blood and Charles wriggled away and escaped out the door. "This neighborhood is going downhill," Ariel said,

"Not like the good ole days," I said, scrolling through jobs.

"No, I mean it. I was at the day center yesterday and there were so many fucking kids. Like forty Charleses. When I'm high, I don't want to make eye contact, I'm not there to flex, I want to sit and be. But these kids are all talking loud and judging each other... like they aren't fucking homeless enough of something. It's like America's Got Talent... only it's America's Gone Homeless... I got kicked out. Someone said I was homophobic because I said something wrong. I said 'bitch, I've been sucking dick for dope since you were in grade school,' and slapped them."

"Ariel, I really hope you never slap me someday... I mean, I say the wrong shit all the time. You are obviously strong, but you are passionate. I've been slapped by passionate women before and it fucking hurts," I said.

"Well, that bitch won. She said I was too old to be at the youth day center. I mean, technically I have another year, but yes. I am too old to be there," Ariel said. "I spent the best years of my life doing this," she said, pointing at me and the office. 'They asked me at Taco Bell if I wanted any sauces with my meal. I said no, because I had some god damned heroin. Heroin is

my fucking fast food hot sauce that I'm going to use to just barely be able to taste the fucking food. I don't know. Fuck Charels."

"What should I be when I grow up?" I asked.

"A fucking... fireman. Or sell cars. I don't know. Suck dick for heroin," Ariel said, leaning against the wall, the rage settling down to a gentle simmering nod. "I was going to be a veterinarian. Kittens and shit. I was going to be the only one who understood your dying dog. I was going to go the extra mile and save your parrot." She was quiet for a second as she relived the dream. "I'm going to bed." She said and disappeared down the hall to her bunk to continue the dream.

I continued to scroll through the ads, feeling desperately alienated by the jobs listed. I glanced at my hands, waxy, blood stained and lizard like. They seemed suited only for shelter work, however... my girlfriend seemed to love me and maybe, just maybe, I could try something that didn't kill me. Maybe trucking.

"Hey, thank you," I jumped at Ariel's words. She had reappeared. "Thanks for trying... and I don't know, not over reacting to shit. It's stupid, but sometimes when you work here It almost feels like a slumber party and not hell." She waited for me to make brief eye contact, then turned and disappeared into the dark shelter again.

I heard Charles screaming on the street and realized this was my moment, the high point of my career. I mopped the blood, the Baha Blast, the spilled coffee, the urine, the puke... As the sun rose, I smoked and looked at the tents. Indifferent to mortal time, men and women sorted their belongings and gossiped, on day four of a meth spree. Something about knowing it was beautiful meant it was over. The toilet revealed its secrets and snapped back to life when I removed the snake.

Walking home I ran into Big Dan. "Long time no see," I said, my heart beating in expectation of the morning whiskey that awaited me just around the corner.

"Yeah, I fucked up," he said. "I pissed dirty at trucking school. Had a toothache. Got drunk, got it pulled, smoked some pot, they gave me five vicodin which of course just pissed me off, so I smoked some heroin. Failed

the drug test. Honey I'm home," he said without a hint of humor. He walked past me towards the shelter. Had I forgone the whiskey that morning, I probably could have gotten a job somewhere else. But I didn't, I too had a toothache to drink away. I was back that night.

Speech was given to man to disguise his thoughts.

-Charles Maurice de Talleyrand

In every shelter I have ever worked at, the intake process has been extensive. It involves a packet of waivers, rules and regulations, a declaration of income, possible fugitive status, a declaration of specific sexual preference and, of course, shelter grievance procedures. It's a sit down meeting requiring upward of twenty signatures and a demanding a high level of informed consent between a hungover shelter worker and someone in abject crisis, often either barely able to hold a pen. It's a kind of chess match with the din of the shelter boiling in the background, waiting to see who gives up first. The prodding snoopy nature of this interrogation and the potential consequences of questions being answered incorrectly sets the tone of the shelter/client relationship. The shelter feeds on data to live; the homeless person provides the data to appease the hunger. There is little honesty coming from both sides.

There are secured internet connections for encrypted HIPPA compliant data to circulate to county and government servers where the data lives comfortably and warmly for decades in server racks or offshore data farms (I honestly have no idea how the internet works). The roof may fail on the shelter, there may be no beds, no food, no period of mourning when last night's guest is discovered dead, however the intake packets must be uploaded to the encrypted server.

Dale stood next to me at the shelter desk. He was wearing red pajamas with a but flap as he shoveled cereal into his mouth. He had recently returned from work at the airport.

"Just so you know, Brian, my son, is sleeping outside in the car," he said.

Brian had overdosed in the bathroom recently. That vulnerable state was an infraction the shelter could not ignore and it's punishment was banishment. We had his social security number and 20 signatures, we didn't need him lousing things up with his addiction anyway. "Understood," I said.

"I had computers when they first came out," Dale continued, pointing at me entering data. "512k ram was a big deal back then. Bill Gates I remember said something like, 512k is more than enough memory for anyone..." Dale shoveled a few more handfuls of cereal into his mouth. "There's probably 2 gigs on my phone. Can you believe that? That's enough for every book ever written. Amazing."

"Maybe 512k is enough memory for anyone," I said, realizing I couldn't maintain the level of concentration I needed to enter the data from the intake forms into the database. "I have ex-wives that I wish I could delete from my memory," I said.

"Tell me about it. My ex is somewhere in New York," Dale said.

"Brian's mom?" I asked.

"Yes. She left, Oh, I think about 1987. She sent divorce papers maybe every 6 months for a few years and I would just tear them up. But I remember getting them the last time and just thinking, fuck it, and signing it. I don't know. I just remember that moment. Thinking, come back and be with your kids, you know?" Dale adjusted his pajama onesie and chewed thoughtfully the memories of thirty years prior.

"Divorce is hell. It's hell," I said.

"I was in the Air Force, you know. I met her in Korea. Man, we had fun. A boy from Cincinnati in Soul. Man. We had fun. We moved back to America, Arizona and I got redeployed to Korea. I was in communications.

It was fun. I dealt with all this encrypted stuff. I didn't know what any of it said, I was just part of the whole thing. But the thing was..." Dale lowered his voice to make sure he wasn't overheard, "it was just a bunch of kids. Most of the people in the military are kids. So at night... you know, we had fun."

I was intrigued. Although I wasn't as old as Dale, I remembered fondly a time when the internet wasn't all about righteous outrage and more about connectivity and creativity. I glanced at the database screen in front of me. As a shelter worker, part of my job was distilling entire broken lives into tidy lines of information for a computer screen. When I was a kid, computer screens where I talked to girls for hours, learned about the world and discovered music. "What kind of fun did you have," I asked.

"Well, you can imagine. I mean we were just kids you know. So, you know what kids do," he said. I assumed it was porn.

"It wasn't porn," he said. "Well, it wasn't all porn. It's funny to think about now. My phone gets instant hard core porn. But it was a big deal back then to get a picture of a topless woman. Encrypt it, send it over a global network of microwave towers and satellites. And we were kids, after hours. What else would we do. Topless women. We also played video games. That was a big deal too. Anyway, I got a dishonorable discharge," he stopped to eat more cereal.

"What video games did you play?" I asked.

"Lets see, Bolo was big," he said.

"Bolo?" I asked, typing the name into google. A pixelated tank game appeared. Indeed it was one of the first networked video games. I was talking to a pioneer. An honest to goodness internet pioneer.

"Let me see," Dale said, peering into my screen. "Yup, I remember that. See, you had a tank and at the beginning of the round you set up defenses. Mines and walls. Then you go try to capture their base. It was fun. But when I was discharged, you know, she... the wife... wasn't used to that lifestyle. We moved back to Cincinnati to be near my parents and I don't know. I went to work and one day she wasn't there anymore. We were just kids though. I always thought though, if the Airforce thought data encryption was such a big fucking deal... don't get me wrong, I think it is..."

but if they really trully thought it was such a big fucking deal, why did they put kids in charge?"

"Does Brian talk to his mom?" I asked after a thoughtful pause.

"No, she doesn't know anything," Dale said. "I can't get a hold of her. Last anyone heard from her was maybe 2005? I should go to bed," Dale said. "I took my medication and have to get up and go to work early."

He disappeared down the hall into the dorm rooms where the collective sedated snoring of 40 men sounded like a giant diesel truck. I saw Brian smoking outside. He was surrounded by his own breath, hanging in the frozen air as he danced to keep warm. I got my coat and a few hand warmers and stepped outside. He shook my hand.

"I'm glad you came out. I was kind of trying to see if it was you. There's a dude asleep by the dumpster and I don't wanna call the cops. I don't know if I have a warrant or whatever, also, the car doesn't have tags and I don't want it to get towed and... you know..."

I shrugged, lit a cigarette and we walked over to the dumpster. On the frozen ground between the dumpster and the recycling bin was a form, wrapped in a cheap wool blanket. I bent over and shook it. It was unresponsive. Any notions of CPR heroics were tempered by memories of seemingly harmless people exploding at me with all sorts of weapons and bodily fluids. I glanced back at the shelter where I knew a camera was trained on us. Cameras were usually only reviewed after deaths. I felt scrutinized.

"I am going to move the car," Brian said, expecting cops and firetrucks. He too glanced at the camera.

I knelt beside him, shook him again. No response. I called 911.

"911 what is your emergency?"

"I have an unresponsive male outside on Scott Street," I said.

"By the shelter?"

"Yes."

"I am dispatching EMS, please stay on the line," she said coldly.

"Fuuuuuuuuuck," the lump said. "Why can't you leave me alone? I just want to fucking sleep. Jesus christ do you have any idea how hard it is to fucking sleep?"

Already I heard ambulances approaching in the distance.

"Is he conscious?" the 911 operator asked.

"Are you conscious?" I parroted the question.

"What the fuck does that mean?" he replied.

"I think so," I said to the operator.

I heard her repeat to the ambulance driver via radio, "The subject is conscious."

"Is he confused or... never mind we're almost there." the ambulance driver said in the background.

"What's the problem buddy?" an officer said while exiting his car and murmuring secrets into the radio handset on his shoulder. "Are ya cold?"

"He wont let me sleep," the man on the ground said.

"Why don't you go inside and sleep in the shelter," the officer said.

"Fuck that place," the man said, to my relief. Shelters don't just let people come in off the street and sleep. I could lose my job for allowing that to happen. With every 911 call there was an incident report, a reviewing of the tapes. 'All guests must be in by 7pm and have a completed intake packet,' read at least nine signs in the shelter.

"Budy, technically you are trespassing. I know a homeless shelter seems like the logical place to sleep but rules are rules. Now we can have the people in the ambulance check you out, maybe take you to hospital for hypothermia, I can cite you for trespass which means run a warrant check

on you or you can keep moving," the officer said, conducting his own functional and actually coherent intake procedure.

"Don't make me go to the hospital. They'll give me that fucking noloxone if I go to sleep. Please don't do that."

"Alright buddy, let's see you stand up and keep moving," the officer said and murmured a few more secrets into his shoulder radio.

"Christ," the man said, grabbing at the dumpsters and pulling himself to his feet. His eyes sparkled in the street lamps. His gray beard was wet with spit. He wrapped the blanket tighter around himself. He staggered away, cursing me and my naive intentions.

"Anything else?" the officer asked.

"No, thank you sir," I said, wanting to apologize for working at a shelter and being utterly incapable of sheltering an unsheltered shelteree'.

The paramedics and officer muttered into their shoulder radios as they got back in their vehicles. They extinguished their lights and departed in a shroud of steam emitted from their tail pipes in the cold night.

Dale was asleep in his bunk when I did my rounds. His bunk lay in a shaft of light from the hall and he lay with his phone in his hand, a disgusted look on his face, his mouth open as if listening to an unsettling story. Cereal lay all around him. Dawn's light came in through the big windows of the shelter and the street became illuminated. Reluctant men loomed over coffee cups and cereal. Mornings were the most dangerous time in a shelter. It's when bodies were discovered, when arguments were settled. It was the unholy act of eviction relived on a grand scale, me as a sheriff.

Dale stopped and spoke softly, "Man, did I do anything weird last night?"

"No, you are always a pleasure to talk to," I said.

"It's just that I take these pills and apparently all I do is eat and talk all night. I mean, I'm an open book, you know that. I'll tell you anything you want to know. But we all have personal stuff we don't want to brag about. We all have secrets, don't we? Anyway, I hope I never bother you. I have to

go meet my son," he said, dawned his yellow vest for working at the airport and slipped out the front door, pausing to rearrange his coat and hat in the face of the cold wind.

As I logged into my HIPPA secure account to log the night's activities, I reflected on the absurdity of communication, log notes and sobriety. I was about to put in the log that nothing happened that night, have it scrambled and sent via satellite into the indifferent ether of the internet. That a man could have died down the street for getting high and drunk enough to sleep didn't matter as much as it made a tidy counterpoint to the end of the story. The part where I made my daily visit to the only bar in town that opened at 8 am to get drunk enough to scramble and encrypt my own thoughts enough to sleep. Dale's sleep medication confessions were safe with me and Jameson.

"Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

— Margery Williams Bianco, *The Velveteen Rabbit*

Arnold

"Oh, I totally thought I saw a kid with a gun," Arnold said. "I was all like, woah."

I tried to nod sympathetically.

"Sometimes I see shit and want to jump back into my training," Arnold continued. "So if we're like, looking at some flowers or some shit and I yell Gun! It's probably just me, being me."

Or someone has a gun, I thought. Arnold had just hired me to work at a smaller shelter in Cincinnati. He looked like a younger Don Quixote, bearded, gigantic and with attentive eyes that somehow saw things

differently than most people. We were cleaning trash up around the dumpsters while he gave me his version of work training.

"I bought everyone kevlar gloves. They should protect you from a needle poke or grabbing the blade of a knife. We ask that guests allow us a brief search of their belongings and I don't want anyone getting AIDS or what-have-you because they put their hands into a woman's purse. I wear mine all the time. They come in handy moments like this," he said, grinning broadly and hoisting a bag into the dumpster. "I am also issuing radios. We'll all have radios and radio handles, or names. So if you are in the laundry room and need help, you can issue a mayday and we'll all come running."

"Help! I can't fold a fitted sheet," I said, joking.

"One of our staff was cornered in the laundry room and I promised her that would never happen again," Arnold continued.

"Folding a fitted sheet?" I asked.

"You don't know how to fold a fitted sheet?" Arnold asked me with an air of disappointment.

"I've seen it done on Youtube. It's like origami meets magic," I said, honestly. At a shelter for kids I once worked at, my boss was a militant meth head who would write me up for my shoddy sheet folding.

"We don't have fitted sheets here, but I do it at home. My fiance has three children. I will teach them too," he said, dusting off his kevlar gloves and making a mental note to colonize his new family with his sheet folding wisdom. I wondered if he could fold fitted sheets with the gloves on. "Where have you worked before this?" Arnold asked, still reeling from the disappointment brought on by my fitted sheet comment.

"Out west I worked in a few shelters for a few years," I said. "I am interested to see how different it is here," I said, looking dreamily off at the Cincinnati skyline. Cincinnati looked like a sun bleached roadkill jaw bone to me, it's skyscrapers, broken and worn teeth. My mind wandered it's lovely post-apocalyptic bars. Madonna's, Junkers, Knock-Back-Nats, each it's own ecosystem of prostitutes, alcoholics and broken hearted wage

workers. Although I was looking at the city, I was seeing the bottles on the back bar. Proud, lined like soldiers, awaiting my inspection.

"I bet it's way different," Arnold said. "What's wrong?" he asked, looking to where I was staring.

"Oh nothing, just admiring the city," I said.

"I thought you were looking at some sort of problem," Arnold said. "Follow me."

We walked out in front of the shelter where people stood in small groups chatting. "No guests on the property until 4:30. You know this. Don't make us issue an exclusion," Arnold said in a booming voice.

"I just want to check my mail," someone said.

"The protocol is to come to the front door and ring the doorbell and someone will issue you your mail," Arnold said.

"I did, no one answered," the person said.

"That's because we were outback," Arnold said, crossing his arms and facing the person. His exercised, hairy and tattooed arms were the enforcement for the protocol.

"Can I check my mail now?"

"Did you ring the bell?" Arnold asked.

"Do you want me to ring the bell right now?"

"Let's practice," Arnold said. The person shrugged and rang the bell. "Hey, what can I get for you?" Arnold asked the person.

"Can I get my mail?"

"Sure, hold on," Arnold said, smiling at me. I felt anxiety sweat drip down my spine. Arnold unlocked the front door of the shelter and held the door for me. He then locked the door behind us. "I am trying to impress on

everyone a sense of order. I don't like the staff splitting and the danger inherent in a lack of structure." Arnold removed his gloves like a surgeon who had finished a delicate operation, using one gloved hand to remove the glove on the other hand, folded them and put them on the desk. He then picked up a stack of mail and sorted through it. "There we are," he said. He put his gloves back on and walked the mail back to the door, unlocked it and handed it to the person. As he closed the door again I could hear others on the street asking for their mail as well. "We'll see how it takes them to get it," Arnold said, repeating the delicate operation of taking his gloves off. He sat comfortably in the office chair and stared out the window. Soon another person rang the doorbell. Arnold paused for a moment, sighed and put his gloves back on. "That's Lewis, he's a character."

Arnold walked to the front door, unlocked it.

"Hi, I wasn't sure if you were busy. Can I get my mail?"

"Sure thing sir, what's the name?"

"Lewis. Come on man, you know me..."

Arnold nodded, closed and locked the door, took off his gloves, retrieved some mail, put his gloves back on and returned to the door. He had just locked the door again when the doorbell rang. "Let me take you on a tour of the building. We could be here all day if I don't."

"I want to tear down these interior walls, I am always afraid someone is hiding in here. It would be easy to just hide in the morning when we clear out. But for now, these are the rooms; this hall for the working program which I'll go into later, this hallway leads to the women's rooms and this area here is for the men."

I stopped by a bulletin board covered in signs. One sign printed on 8.5 x 11 inch copy paper read simply, 'Please Read These Signs.'

"So the working program is a few vetted guys who prove to me they can keep a job and save money. They have to show me proof, every week, they worked AND put money in a bank account. I stand there at that door on Friday and ask for proof. They know I'm going to do it. If they don't have

proof, I ask them to leave. Simple as that. I'll be having you do that," he said, recrossing his arms.

"What's the proof, like a letter from their boss?" I asked.

"No, like a timeclock print out. I'm not their dad, I'm not going to ask them to beg their boss for a letter saying they worked," Arnold said.

"Do I keep the time card print out," I asked.

"Yes."

"So if it's like something they printed at the library, you'll know later," I clarified.

"Yes. Wait, what do you mean?" Arnold asked.

"I don't want to seem skeptical, but if I were fired or something... I might consider doing that," I said.

"Doing what?"

"Printing out something that looks like a timecard at the library," I clarified.

"Why would you do that, we need the actual time card print out," Arnold said, facing me, hairy gigantic arms twitching.

"I mean," I said, clearing my throat. "I know if it were me, I can't think of a lot of jobs I've had that I can just get a time card print out whenever I want so I would be afraid and go print one out at the library."

"It's ok if they print it out at the library. It doesn't have to be from a work computer," Arnold said.

"But what if I just made it up..." I was interrupted by the door bell ringing.

"If you just guessed what your hours were?" Arnold asked.

"No, if I lied and just wrote some shit down." I said.

Arnold seemed to like this idea. "Just write down some crazy hours because you actually didn't work that day."

"Maybe you got fired or laid off..." the doorbell interrupted me again.

"I would cross check with the bank deposits they showed me," Arnold said, recrossing his arms.

"I am only asking because if I am going to be incharge of the door I want to know what I'm talking about. The bank deposit of a paycheck very often reflects work done weeks ago or even a month ago if it's a government job, how would I check that?" I asked over a numerous doorbell rings.

"They pull up their bank account on their phone, I look at it. It just takes a second," Arnold said.

"But how do I know if they went to work that week by looking at their bank account?" I asked, a little too loudly as the doorbell ringing had inexplicably stopped.

"You look at their time card printout," Arnold said.

I nodded, sighed and read the 'Please Read This Sign,' sign again.

"You'll catch on," Arnold said. The doorbell rang again. "I think I hear the doorbell," Arnold said, peering warily into a dark corner of the room.

As Arnold put his gloves back on in preparation of opening the front door again, he stopped and was silent for a moment. Then he spoke, "You know, when I did security on my last tour, there was this sweet little boy. He brought us little dishes of food to the front gate of the compound. Of course we didn't eat it but it was great to see. We would leave him bottles of water or toys... footballs and stuff. We'd see him in the distance running with his friends playing with what we left him. But... sometimes he wouldn't show. At first we thought nothing of it. But the more I thought about it, days he didn't show for water... I wonder if he was telling us we were going to be attacked. I wonder where he went. I just assumed he'd blow up before my eyes one day, little arms and feet flying fucking everywhere."

On my way home after my ‘orientation,’ I decided to stop in at the bar to drink heavily and look for a different job on my phone.

Sam, a 70 year old Army vet, was bartending and mid animated discussion with Gary, a ruin of a man who lived upstairs of the bar, “...no you don’t get it at all. Men and lesbians are not the same thing. I’m not attracted to women, I’m attracted to lesbians. It’s different. Think about it...” Sam lined up my shot and beer. “How’d your first day go?” she asked. Did my latent attraction for her make me a lesbain... or just a pervert? She was a short woman with hard features but she carried that bottle like a weapon. She pointed it at me and I got goosebumps. She poured. It came out in tiny spurts. She looked at me and smiled. Lord.

“Well, I think they’re fucking insane down there,” I said, the first shot melting the anxiety and terror from my spine.

“Does Sexy Arnold still work down there?” Sam asked.

“Why, yes. Yes he does,” I said, surprised she knew him

“He used to come in here a lot before he started working there. Then he met ‘that woman,’ and now he never comes in. Tell him his friends at The Dive asked about him. Tell him it’s too bad he’s too good for us now,” Sam smirked.

“He still comes in and buys things occasionally,” Gary said.

“Yeah, just not alcohol, and not from me,” Sam said, lighting a cigarette.

Arnold seemed not as bad once I was good and drunk. I could picture him at the bar, his wild eyes scanning the dark corners behind the pool table for Afghan children with bombs strapped to them. “He puts up a front, a big bad front, but he’s as crazy as the rest of us,” Sam said, holding the Jameson bottle, waiting for me to ask for another.

I found my niche at the shelter. Working graveyard shifts I was safe from most of the politics of the shelter. And on the rare occasion I had to call Arnold in the middle of the night when a guest died or I had to call 911, he didn’t answer until the morning.

"Sorry, when I take this Trazodone, I am out. I told my wife to wake me up, but... I sleep on the couch and it's a long story. I am working on it," Arnold apologized one morning as he walked in the emptying shelter, brushing snow off his shoulders.

"It worked itself out," I said, referring to the guest with a knife wound who refused to go to the ER for hours. "I don't know what you could have done anyway, I called because I thought maybe you could talk to them."

"I am sorry buddy, I feel like I let you down," Arnold said. "I honestly didn't expect this job to be 24/7. I told the director when I was hired I was going back to school. I have the wife's kids to worry about. They're fucking deamons, they don't clean up after themselves. I try to make the house work, you know, a house should work as a unit, as a team but I keep getting shoved to the outside..." he unloaded.

"The one thing I learned from my 6 thousand divorces is I know nothing about marriage," I said. I frantically typed the log notes and arranged papers on the desk to indicate I was ready to leave.

"I mean running a shelter is like running five households at once, you know? I can't tell you how much I appreciate guys like you, on my side," he said.

"Well, I like to say it's just a job," I said, "but it's really the closest thing to a skill I have. I don't know if you've noticed, Arnold, but I am not very employable. So don't ever worry about me leaving. Where the fuck am I going to go?"

"I know the director will be pissed," Arnold said.

"About what?" I asked.

"Me not answering my phone. I am on call," Arnold said.

"I didn't say anything about it in the log," I said.

"You should have," Arnold said.

"Nothing happened. I think me calling you in front of them is what diffused it, so it's fine," I said.

Arnold sat next to me at the desk and stretched out in his chair, blocking my escape. I was apparently trapped into his therapy session. “Buddy you have to write these things in the log. What if someone dies?”

“Well, in my experience working in shelters over the years, the only people who read homeless shelter logs are homeless shelter workers looking for mistakes, which is ridiculous. Think about it. Looking for mistakes in a shelter log; these people's lives are defined and riddled with mistakes they made, mistakes we make and mistakes other people make. Honestly, fuck the log... and if someone dies, of course I'll write that down because that'll bring them back to life.” I said.

Arnold looked as if I had defamed the bible, “I made that Google Doc...”

“I'm not saying we don't need a log, I'm saying it's not as important as our health and safety. You can add in something about missing the call if you want,” I said, putting my bag on my shoulder hoping it would que Arnold to stand. He sighed deeply and looked far off into the shelter.

“Funny thing about shelter work, when you get in a fight with your wife, there's nowhere for you to go. You can't go to the shelter. Working in a shelter sort of takes away a fundamental safety net, ya know?”

“Oh, I know. I've seen that before. People who get into working with the homeless because they were homeless themselves. Well, homelessness is chronic and these folks who work in shelters are vulnerable and just working in a shelter makes them more vulnerable because they can't use the place anymore... so when they became homeless again, they were fucked” I said.

“How do we fix that?” Arnold asked.

“I don't know,” I said. I wasn't going to volunteer the fact that many was the time I had slept on the job because I had nowhere to go the next day.

“As shelter manager, I don't really get to see what goes on here at night. My job involves a lot of paperwork and meetings. You know what? I think I am going to do an overnight shift. Not get in anyone's way, but just be

present. Sort of learn what it's about." It dawned on me that Arnold had been kicked out of his house.

"That's a fine idea," I said, standing but still unable to get past his giant legs.

I cleared my throat and checked the time on my phone, "Well I should be..." I began, then noticed Arnold was asleep. I sat back down and waited for the day's staff to arrive. I'd shake Arnold awake then.

The next evening when I began my graveyard shift I had forgotten about Arnold's and mine's conversation. I settled in at the front desk and pretended to read the log. I scanned the bed list for surprises, there were none. I made my rounds, confirmed my favorite junkies were breathing, inspected the fridge for leftovers and then stepped outside to smoke. I was admiring the Cincinnati skyline when a jeep door opened. Arnold fought his seat belt for a while as he emerged from the vehicle, then leaned against it. In an overly casual tone he said, "what's popping? Is there homeless peoples in there? Everything hunky dory?"

"This must be the Sexy Arnold I have heard about," I said.

"Oh, me and Sam talked about you tonight, Mr. Jameson. Fucking, drinking Jameson in Burbon country. What the fuck?" Arnold said, sliding off the side of the car and almost falling down. "Fucking Jeeps always do that. But I had to get a Jeep. Fucking cliche, army guy with a Jeep. Comeone. Stupid."

"Come on," I said, offering an elbow for him to lean on.

"No! Shhhh. I've thought this through, hold on. This is special ops shit. We can't go in the back because the hallway is narrow and you can see everything on the camera. We can't go in the front because there are too many cameras."

"What does that leave?" I asked.

"The chimney," Arnold said and laughed through hacking coughs until he was suddenly sad.

"Well, there's the trash bin," I said.

Arnold sayed and thought about it. "Brilliant," he said.

So I went in and loaded all of the shelter trashes into the rolling trash bin we used to take trash to the dumpster. Nonchalantly I passed under the security cameras Arnold had installed and made my way outside to the dumpster.

"Wait," Arnold said as he put on his gloves. It took him a moment, but when they were on, he said, "ok, I'm ready.

He was heavy in the trash bin, but I managed to wheel him back into the building. I wheeled the bin into the laundry room. I made a bed of blankets on the floor but couldn't wake Arnold. So I put a blanket on him as he lay in the bin.

The night drug on with all it's tiny tragedies. I spent two hours trying to pry Brie, a woman on meth, out of the donations room. Her mania to organize and fold was at a fevered pique. Usually this was a ritual between her and I, she did amazing work which made me look good to the other shelter workers, however Arnolds signs on the door of the donations room were unmistakable; "Please read this sign; absolutely no guests in the donation room." Furthermore, within the room were a few other signs, one of which read, "If you are a guest and you are in this room, you risk exclusion." As Arnold was sleeping in the laundry room, her presence in the donation room made me uneasy.

"Ok, I am hurrying," she said. "Hey Patrick, what's the slowest thing in the world?"

"What?"

"A meth head in a hurry," she laughed.

Part of the night's duties were washing blankets. In the laundry room was an six foot pile of blankets. I stood outside the laundry room conflicted. I liked Arnold, but waking him up seemed like an impossibly annoying layer added to the evening. I krept in. Arnold lay on his back in the bin, his legs in the air like a dead roach. I shoveled the dirty blankets into the washer

and started it. On the washer was a sign that read, "Dirty laundry on the ground, clean laundry folded on the shelves." Was this a poetic observation or an edict? On the wall next to the washer a sign read, "No guest's laundry except by appointment and with approval of management. No exceptions." I wondered if Arnold had put signs up at his new wife's house. No, I was certain he had.

Arnold moaned and tried to open his eyes wide. They were glassy and unseeing.

"Come on Sexy Arnold," I said, trying to help him out of the bin. He pushed me away, quite forcefully. Being pushed by a younger man one really feels the frailty time and whiskey have wrought on one's body. I thought about the problem for a moment. I had a feeling he was about to piss himself and cleaning his piss off the floor seemed like a far easier task than out of the bin. "Up! Now!" I shouted.

Arnold struggled to his feet however the bin rolled beneath him. Blindly he grabbed at the shelves beside him and pulled a pile of clean blankets down on top of him. He let out a mournful sound as the blankets mixed with his nightmares conspiring to drown him. He fell to the floor and half swam in the blankets for a time, then asphyxiated himself to sleep. I couldn't imagine sleeping next to that beast. War is hell but the night terrors and beer farts of a veteran must be worse. God Bless the ex wives.

I settled back in at the desk to play repetitive video games to pass the time. Glancing at the clock I saw it was approaching 4am, the time I began looking forward to drinks. It was the loveliest time of the night; the 2am bar traffic had ceased, the 3am police sirens dispatched to domestic abuse calls had finished. 4am was the deep breath the city took before the early risers took to the roads; the airport freight workers, the breakfast cooks. 5am was as cruel as any other time in the day. 4am was holey. Until Arnold staggered up to me.

"This is all wrong," Arnold said.

"What's all wrong," I asked.

"We need to get going on laundry, we need to mop, the parking lot needs to be swept," he slurred.

"Ok, which do you want to do?" I asked.

"Ok, which to do you want to do," he also said, swaying.

"Well, if you mop, I'll sweep the parking lot," I said.

"Ok, you go sweep the parking lot," Arnold directed.

I grabbed my cigarettes and headed out. As an afterthought, I grabbed a broom as I was considering actually sweeping the parking lot.

In homage to the heavy still fog, I blew dramatic smoke clouds. The trash in the parking lot was a mixture of sugar packets, syringes caps and a million cigarette buts. I couldn't help thinking about the girls in highschool who taught me how to smoke. How when they said brilliant and exotic things they punctuated the moment by blowing dramatic smoke clouds, or stamping on their cigarettes as if part of some folk dance. I wondered if these cigarette buts beneath the Cincinnati skyline had too been part of brilliant insights. If so, their lives were not lost in vain.

Returning to the building I heard raised voices. They were coming from the donation room. I really didn't want to be part of this territorial battle.

"Listen, I don't even know who the fuck you are, but you better not stand in my way like this," I heard Brie say.

"Staff only in the room, do you see the signs?" Arnold said. This was my fault on some level. I shouldn't have left.

"You better get this crack head out of my face," Brie said.

I tugged at Arnold's shirt from behind. He kept barking but let me guide him, "I mean can't you read? It's right there on the sign. Do you see the sign?" I guided him to the utility room. He sat next to the mop sink on the floor, under a sign which read "Sink for mop only." I didn't feel like it was the right time to tell him I had peed in that sink nights there was a line for the restroom. It didn't matter anyway, he was asleep again. I brought him a blanket, turned the light off and hoped he would stay down.

"Who the fuck is that?" Brie asked. "Makes me feel unsafe having some giant crackhead corner me in there."

"Yeah, that was shitty," I said. "Did you find a coat?" I asked, trying to lure her off the tricky subject.

"That shit can trigger some PTSD and shit. Yeah, There's a few things I need," she said, returning to the donations room while continuing to mutter about Arnold.

The night dragged on like a hellish version of I love Lucy set in a crematorium. But presently Arnold slowly sobered enough to feel shame. He settled in next to me at the desk, staring into a cup of coffee. I tried to impress on him the most annoying part of the situation wasn't him driving drunk to his work, intimidating guests and being a nuisance, it was the fact that I didn't care that he had done any of that; I was annoyed that he wanted me to punish him.

"You have to put this in the log," he said.

"Sexy Arnold, I won't write this in the log. It's not a moral stand... it's that I don't have the conflict resolution skills, I don't have the training or will to work this out with you. I don't have the training to deal with anything that happens here. But I show up and I like to think that's enough," I said, realizing for myself what my job truly entailed.

"I fucked up," he said.

"Dude, I don't care. I'm writing 'no incident' in the log."

"The security cameras," he said.

"I'm pretty sure you are the only person who checks those," I said.

He sighed deeply and stared into his shitty shelter coffee.

Guests were leaving one by one, some to jobs, some to free breakfasts. Some said goodbye, some looked suspiciously at Arnold.

"I'm not holding this over your head," I said. "I just work here," I packed my cigarettes and notebook into my bag. I had decided to leave early. I had heard of a place near the airport that served alcohol at 7am and decided to check it out. Sexy Arnold could mind the ship until 9 am when his shift was supposed to start. "And since you're here, I'm leaving early."

He pulled his legs in and let me pass. "You'll do fine," I said. "I'll be back tonight." I liked to think that was the Day Arnold was initiated into graveyard shelter work. But more likely it was a scary dangerous situation initiated by two broken men with nowhere else to go that night, which isn't that really all shelter work is, when you think about it? I'll write it down here, but not in your fucking log, Arnold.

The farmer is the only man in our economy who buys everything at retail, sells everything at wholesale, and pays the freight both ways.

- John F. Kennedy.

### The Shower List

"I'll look this over later when I have time to focus on it and let you know what I think," George said, standing in the rain outside the shelter door disregarding our intake packet. "I was told you have showers. I just need a shower," he said. He was an imposing man, oozing dignity which mixed with the rain dripping down the furrows of his brow. "I have a job, I have all that. I am between places and I need a shower," he said. I couldn't identify his accent, or nationality. His logic was sound, I couldn't deny him a shower from a half full shelter, even if shelter policy was that guests must make a formally signed statement identifying their race, gender and sexuality before entering. I let him pass.

"I have my own towel and soap," he said.

"Can I have your name? I just have to make sure you aren't on our list of people not allowed in... I also have to write you down on the shower list" I said.

He considered the question, was annoyed by it, but soon relented. "George Hall. Check your list, I am not on it. What is a shower list? What do you do with that?"

I looked down at the clipboard and felt ashamed of it. "The showers are down this hall in the back," I said pointing the way.

"They could be used more," he said under his breath through his mouth, trying not to breathe our shelter air. He disliked the shower list as much as I did. He side eyed it as we walked.

I opened the door to the tiny fanless shower. George looked it up and down, grunted his approval and stepped in and closed the door.

I was working a double that night with a new employee. A lanky albino child, terrified of making mistakes, named Matt. He was eager for tasks which, in turn, he could not complete without careful coaching. I cursed Tic-Toc when he pawed uselessly at the drier door hinge and not the handle trying to open it. He looked bewildered at the appliance, then scanned the signs the shelter manager had posted all around for clues how to operate the machine.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" I asked him.

"How do I..." he began to ask how to open the dryer door.

"When I was your age everyone wanted to be a musician or astronaut. Now kids tell me they want to be fucking accountants and shit," I said.

"Is it locked?" He searched my face for clues about the drier.

"Being an accountant sounds like a plan B. You never actually achieve your plan A, you have a plan B to fall back on. What I want to know is, by saying you want to be an accountant, Matt, are you really saying you plan on failing at being an Accountant?" I asked. "What's the plan B for being an accountant?"

"I don't want to be an accountant," Matt said. "What the hell is an accountant anyway? Isn't that all done by computers now? Payroll,

finances? It's all done by computer. Cool story bro, but no one wants to be an accountant."

"You could work in a laundromat. Matt's Laundromat. Has a ring to it," I said.

He cocked his head in annoyance, "How do I open this thing?"

"This shift is 14 hours, I think you have time to figure it out, check youtube," I said.

"It's locked, it has to be," Matt said, tracing the buttons with his fingers and reading the signs on the wall again. 'Dirty Laundry on the floor, clean laundry folded on the shelves' read one like an ancient riddle.

"Aren't videogames full of mysteries these days? I've seen that there Minecraft. You are always gathering and manipulating shit. Think of it as a Minecraft drier," I said.

George appeared filling the laundry room with a fresh clean scent. He looked at us both with an air of disappointment. "May I wash my clothes?" Apparently he hadn't read the sign on the laundry room door that said 'No Guests.' I hesitated in answering and he shrugged and opened the washer. Seeing it was full of washed clothes, he took them in his arms and opened the dryer and threw them in. Matt rolled his eyes.

"I will wash my clothes then go," George said, leaving the laundry room.

"I told you you'd figure it out," I said to Matt.

"I'm taking the ASVAB soon. I want to be in the military, not an accountant," Matt said.

"Let's hope working a dryer isn't on there," I said. "Also, the military needs accountants. I'm sure they'll train you to be an accountant. To count bullets and shit. Someone has to count the drones. You can count drones, cant you?"

"You know what it means when there's one less drone, don't you?" Matt said.

"An orphan got a home?" I said?

"Something like that," Matt agreed.

George was in the TV room now, eating cereal in his boxer shorts, staring thoughtfully at the TV. He apparently hadn't read the signs that said, 'No consumption of food of any kind in the TV room.' Or maybe he started reading the sign and got bored halfway through. I'm surprised I had actually read the sign. Matt pulled me to the side and whispered, "He's eating in the TV room."

"So getting guests to follow the rules is part of working in a shelter," I said. "Can you handle this?" I said and pretended to busy myself at a nearby billboard arranging and reading passive aggressive signs.

"There is no eating in the TV room," Matt said in a voice three octaves lower than his normal speaking voice. I couldn't help but turn and look. George's concentration on his own thoughts was unbroken. "Excuse me, if you don't follow the rules I will have to..."

"Are you talking to me? I'm sorry, I wasn't listening. I don't know anyone here so I assumed you were talking to someone else," George said, not looking at Matt.

"Yes... the sign..."

"What is your name?" George asked.

"My name?" Matt paused as he struggled to remember it. "Matt."

"Hello Matt, my name is George. Nice to meet you," George said with an air of tired irony.

"Nice to meet you," Matt said.

"Do you work here?" George said.

"Yes," Matt's voice broke as he struggled to maintain the low register.

"So tell me about this program, Matt. Can I get my mail here?"

"I don't know," Matt said.

"Oh, I was told you could get mail here. You see, I'm just here to check it out. I took a shower and that's great. I was thinking this could help me out if I could get mail here," George said. He turned to look at Matt now which caused Matt's lanky frame to wilt. "Why don't we go through the intake packet together and see if it says whether I can get mail."

"Sure," Mat said in his normal high voice.

"I see now I shouldn't have been eating here. I would have paid more attention to that if I was staying here, or in the program," George said, throwing away his paper bowl. He produced the intake packet from a folder stowed in his backpack. "Sit," George said, motioning for Matt to join him on the couch.

George had successfully taken Matt off my hands and I could attend to the myriad of tragedies in the shelter at my own befuddled pace. And as it was a weekend, I had the added pressure of needy volunteers who had come to take their selfies in the kitchen. Another of my duties was throwing away warm fresh casseroles baked by local grandmas. The health department said we could not serve food from anywhere but a commercial kitchen, so we threw the food away. Social workers from the local ERs called asking if we had room for people... who would never show. Ya know how many hospital discharge papers I have seen with the diagnosis being 'homeless?' After I turned the lights off at 10:30 the action had mostly died off except for some lingering giggling like a grade school sleepover. I had forgotten about George and Matt until I discovered them leering into a laptop in the office.

"I don't think I could pass this, honestly," George said.

"I'm sure a lot has changed on the ASVAB," Matt said.

"Are you trying to be an officer?" George said.

"That's the ultimate dream," Matt said.

George leaned back in the executive chair he was sitting in, usually reserved for the shelter director. "You are a strong young man, why don't you work at the airport? The money is ok, they need people like you. You don't want to grow up and, well, end up like..." George said, gradually lowering his voice and obviously referring to me.

"I need to get the fuck out of here George," Matt said. "I need to get the fuck out of this shitty town."

George was silent for a moment. He arranged some papers on the desk and examined a few pens in a pen cup. "I understand that. When I was young in the Philippines, living on a base, getting out of the island was my guiding dream. I needed to get off that base. I needed it in my soul." George pounded his barrel chest when he said this. "I was living my father's life, not mine. So I promised myself I'd get off that base and see the world. And I did, sort of. I saw bases all over the world. The same jeeps, the same stripes, the same haircuts, all over the word. And when Desert Storm happened I thought, yes. Finally, I will see the world. We did a crash course in Iraqi tank weaknesses, we looked at slides, studied workbooks then my batalion shipped out. We hit the desert. But I was in the part of the tank where you see nothing. I was the loader. For weeks I saw nothing. It was hot, it was so loud. I peed in a bucket. I knew nothing, day after day. I thought I was going crazy. Sometimes at night the gunner would tell stories about what we had done, but I had no idea. And when it was over I had to read old newspapers to try and guess what we had done, where. why and when. Suddenly I had plenty of time again. We were stationed at an airport for a year after that. Sometimes I would get out and see the burned cars and tanks from the Iraqi army. That's when I realized it was a joke. All of the training... It was a fucking joke. Do you know why and how we won that war so fast?"

"Superior firepower and technology," Matt said.

"We were fighting English and American tanks. They were fucking Patton tanks from the Korean War. We were fighting our own antiques. It was all a set up. It was a joke. It was all a joke. The Iraqi army was a war museum." George said.

Matt was enthralled. The story wasn't having its intended effect on Matt and George was getting discouraged. I leaned against the wall to get more comfortable.

"So go get a fucking job, live first. Make some cash, man. Make some cash. I wish to God I had taken my life more seriously when I was young. I see people passing up on fortunes everyday. You may say, if you know so much, why do you work at an airport and have to take a shower at a homeless shelter? I am investing in my future. I am saving money and investing," George said with a glimmer in his eye.

"What are you investing in?" Matt asked.

George inhaled deeply and picked up a framed photo on the desk and looked at the happy children holding a football in the photo. He put the photo down and looked Matt in the eye and said, "Bitcoin and Tomatoes."

Matt mouthed the words, then tilted his head in confusion.

"I take my check and half goes to bitcoin and the other half I make a payment on a piece of land in Illinois. In a few years I will go there and grow tomatoes. A tomato seed is one hundredth of a penny. You can have 100 tomatoes on a plant in a season. I've seen it. I will sell them at the farmers market. At a dollar a tomato, that's a thousand percent return. Bitcoin will support me until then."

Matt snorted.

"Well, you can work, here. What do you make, ten dollars an hour? Risk your life for ten dollars an hour?" George said.

"I guess I am going to risk my life for less than that in the military," Matt said.

"Or you could stay and get rich like the rest of us," George said.

"Growing tomatoes in Illinois?" Matt asked, bewildered.

"And bitcoin. It's better than your stupid plan," George said. "Your plan is stupid. Where will you be in ten years? Where?"

"I'd like to be an officer or..."

"How many people become officers? I'll tell you, one officer to a thousand troops. Go to the airport and get a job. Make a life, grow it," George said.

"That's just... insane," Matt said.

George was silent for a moment. He nodded. He had heard enough. He stood up and left the room. Matt gave me a pleading glance and followed him.

"You'll see. You'll escape this shelter and go to a camp that looks like this shelter, get deployed to a place that looks like this shelter..." George was shouting now, pointing at the signs on the wall. "Look, little weak man. I will put your name on your precious shower list. You'll be back. I will write your name on the shower list," George said, grabbing the shower list clipboard from the front desk and scribbling on it.

"Matthew Jones or what ever your fucking name is. There, you have a shower reserved in four years when you come back. " George slammed the clipboard down, gathered his laundry and stormed out into the night.

"He has a point," I said. And since then bitcoin is up roughly %1000.

Can Honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is Honour? A word. What is that word 'honour'? Air.

-Falstaff

I walked into the shelter kitchen at 4am, scraping the bottom of a container of Wendy's Chili with a plastic spoon. Brian, CJ and Steve looked up at me with disdain.

"Wendy's chili? Fuck bro, do Dixie Chilli, do Skyline... don't waste your time on Wendy's Chili," Brian said.

"Oh the Cincinnati Chili thing..." I began

"It's not a 'thing,' it's the mother fucking truth. Try it. You'll learn," CJ said and turned back to look at a set of keys on the table.

While sucking on my Wendy's spoon, I learned a man had gone to jail suddenly on an out of state warrant. While pawing through his things, CJ had found his car keys. Examining the registration, it was discovered the car belonged to a Smantha Smith in Arizona. No one knew her or anybody in Arizona, "Fuck I had forgotten that was a state," CJ said. There was much discussion on what to do with the car. We were surrounded by 8.5x11 signs dictating the minutiae of shelter use. Expired cereal and bent and bulging cans of food looked unappetizing in the dim light. The keys lay on the counter before us.

"Scrap it's worth like 200\$" Steve said. Steve had an expensive habit.

"Don't you need the title for that?" CJ asked. He had been pretending to work at a place that recycled ink printers. He had quit weeks earlier and his unemployment was painfully obvious to everyone but his case worker. I had walked in on him a few times standing in the bathroom rubbing a broken pen on his clothes to maintain the appearance of his employment. He looked at me with sheepish eyes, then smiled like a 9 year old. The ravages of addiction and fifty years made him very much look like a 9 year old. You couldn't get too mad.

"I mean you get more with the title, yes," Steve said. "I think I know a guy who can get us some cash quick."

"It's way too old to Uber," Brain said, swirling an undissolved creamer in his lukewarm coffee. He was forcing the coffee down to amplify an unsatisfying meth high. "We could do Postmates though." This struck a chord with the group. Everyone's ears perked up.

"What is Postmates again exactly?" Steve asked. Steve liked quick answers to questions. He was prone to storming out of the shelter and getting high

or drunk whenever he encountered a tiny tragedy. He wore his hair as if it were 1983, a Van Halen pony tail to go with his cargo shorts. Although his outfit was poor protection from the Cincinnati cold it did protect him from feeling as old as he was. He too was unemployed in the work program. His cover for the case manager was bringing back to-go packages of food and calling them his 'shift meal.'

"It's simple, you deliver shit to assholes," Brian said. Brian was Dale's son. This second generation shelter citizen juggled harmless scam easily because he was genuinely good natured. So good natured he needed medicinal amounts of deadly narcotics to face reality everyday. Over the next hour a plan was devised. The car would be shared for food delivery. Each driver would keep their tips, pay outs would go to an account everyone had access to. This account would also be used to fill the gas tank. The car would be parked at the shelter parking lot with the key kept in the wheel well. If shit went down, each conspirator would walk away and claim to have no knowledge of the car. Brian gave a short tutorial on how to work the app and potential problems that might come up. A phone was produced, no questions were asked about its origin, and it was decided the phone would live in the car and be the delivery driver to use while working. I almost wanted in on this.

People began waking up and staggering and coughing into the shelter halls. Someone asked me for socks, breaking the spell for me of being a co-conspirator of this beautiful plan. As I turned to work my job, the delivery phone vibrated. Brain offered the phone to the others, first.

"Do you want this one? No takers? Well I'm off," he said, taking the car keys which had sat on the counter between the three men until this point. "See ya."

"Housing first is an evidence based approach to shelter management that..." the case manager droned on as I sat at the shelter desk my next evening shift. I wasn't sure if she was talking to me or some hidden microphone. I had worked in shelters for years and heard all the slogans before. Kentucky was about ten years behind the west coast in shelter jargon. 'Housing First,' was in theory a way to prioritize shelter and housing for people experiencing homelessness in order to address the issues that made the given person homeless, which sounds all well and good, however, in practice 'Housing First' was a buzz term shelters used to snatch up more

funding. Shelter funding was a yearly game of Hungry Hippos that began at the start of the fiscal year. Nonprofits shouted this year's buzzwords and pumped on their hippo button to snatch pieces of funding. I think the case manager was playing Hungry Hippo with me. Over my hangover I kept hearing "Housing first... housing first." Finally she must have made a joke, I knew this because she was laughing. I pretended to laugh too and she left saying something awful like 'toodles.' I watched her drive away on the security camera. A few moments passed and people began to approach the shelter, feeling safe in the knowledge she was gone.

Dale appeared first. As he appeared through the doors, he looked cautiously around. "Is she gone?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Man, she'd be pissed. I bought a car," he admitted to me.

"Oh yeah? Why did you do that? What about an apartment? What about housing first?" I asked. I hated conversations with grown ass men who were older than me where I was supposed to admonish them over their life choices.

"Oh... to cut to the chase, I've been promised so much and with how often people get kicked out of here, I thought maybe having a car I could stay in... lock the doors on...that Brian and I could stay in... it would be a load off," he said. "Have you seen Brian?"

"No," I said, but then remembered the car and the food delivery plan from last night.

"He texted me from a new number, said he was working," Dale said. I surmised the food delivery plan was working. "He's a hard worker when he gets his teeth in something. Before he went to prison, he was a mechanic. And he was good with computers. I used to be good with computers too. He has skills." Dale took off his reflective vest. "Wanna see my car?"

Dale's new car was a 90s SUV with rusted wheel wells. The passenger seat was already reclined and I recognized a shelter blanket in it. It looked nice under the street lamp. It was an Ohio car. If the salt and potholes hadn't killed it so far, it would take an act of God to kill it at this point.

"I took a nap at work. I don't sleep much here. It can be kind of scary. Signaling those big planes in and not sure if I am awake or dreaming. You have to admit, standing on a tarmac signaling cargo jets around on two hours of sleep sounds scary. Sometimes I am really not sure if I am dreaming or not." Dale said, kicking the tires. "I feel better already owning this, I really do."

"I am the opposite. When I own a car, I can't sleep. I just picture it not starting in the morning. So I wake up with enough time to take the bus," I said. "I quickly come to resent the thing."

"I wouldn't rely on the buses around here. They are so infrequent, if you miss one out at the airport, you're just stuck out there till the morning. Trust me, it's happened to me. And living at a shelter, you miss one night, you can lose your bed. I feel safer with this," Dale said, picking at the flakes of metal falling from the wheel wells.

"I have to say this; couldn't that have gone towards getting an apartment?" I asked diplomatically.

"Well, if I put 1500 down on first last and a deposit, how the hell am I going to get to work?" Dale asked.

His logic was irrefutable. Giving the homeless a 1000 dollar car and a gas card might end their homelessness but it would end the game of Hungry Hippos. Thousands of case managers would be without jobs, seeking their free 1000 dollar car, bitterly mumbling "what ever happened to housing first?"

I let Dale into the shelter to go to bed while I smoked. Brian parked the orphan car on the street next to me.

"Was that my dad?" he asked.

"Yeah, he's headed to bed." I said.

"Here," Brian said, producing a large bag of Wendy's fast food. "There should be enough for everyone in there. "I have to go get Skyline and take it to Latonia," he said, speeding off. I cringed when I saw he had no light

over the Arizona license plate. I peered in the bag. There was plenty of Wendy's chili.

At the end of my shift, my morning replacement appeared and suspiciously scanned the bed list. "Where's Brian?" she asked. "Too many no shows, he's out."

"I think he's working," I said.

"Sure," she said.

But he was working. Perky, distracted, sweating from bad dope, he cut in front of me in line at the bar to deliver food to the bartender just a few minutes later.

"Babe, you saved my life, everything is closed when I get up to go to work," the bartender said.

"I know, if I weren't stealing hashbrowns, I'd starve," Brian said.

He hadn't noticed me. I sat and glowed with whiskey and admiration as I heard the shelter car start and groan off into the busy Cincinnati morning traffic. The bartender grabbed a few bites then resumed pouring poison. I wondered what percent of the bar's take was related to the homeless industry. Who else at the bar worked for a shelter, who was homeless. Who was high, who was a suicidal vet, who actually had steady hands. Smoking outside I briefly saw the shelter car again, then an hour later as I was stumbling home, I saw it again. It was a cozy layer of familiarity to a town which seemed so deadly to me up to that point.

Probably a week later, Shelter management had decided, despite their 'Housing First' approach, that guests now had to prove their employment to stay there. From the grape vine I learned our social worker had been publicly embarrassed. Someone had shouted at her a cruel truth. Something like, "...bitch you have no idea what goes the fuck on in here. Half these mother fuckers don't have jobs, they just come up in here drunk and kiss your ass." Social Worker retaliated as directly as she knew how; she printed signs and posted them on everyone's bunks stating pay stubs from weeks prior were required, parking passes were required with proof of

car ownership in the shelter parking lot and there was a new chore list. Scanning the bedlist when I got to work I saw naturally a third of guests had decided to leave that night. All three of the delivery crew were gone. But like out of some aboriginal folklore, some nights after the bar I'd hear in the distance the groan of that stolen car's muffler struggling to make another delivery. Tip your delivery driver. He knows where you live. He probably doesn't have much to lose, either. I finally tried Dixie Chili. That shit is amazing.

Sleep in heavenly peace.

-Josef Mohr

Silent Night

Max had beaten Ashley. Ashley came into the shelter around 1am. Under the fluorescent lights in the kitchen, her pale face was growing and swelling like melting plastic. The blue of her eyes were no longer piercing against her pale skin, now they melted into the marine blue greens of a fresh bruise. It was fucking Christmas eve again. It's like we keep having to relive the fucking nightmare until we get it right. I was working with a kid, a recent college graduate, named Mandy. She almost begged Ashley to allow her to call the cops. Ashley refused, "I can't call the cops on my husband on Christmas eve," she said. This enraged Mandy. She made fists as we stood there in the kitchen. I felt my palms sweat.

Mandy turned to me and half shouted, "She probably has a concussion." She shook her head and left the kitchen to go to the office to find medical supplies, phones and probably laptop computers, training manuals and VR glasses, the other expensive but worthless shit laying around nearly every homeless shelter in America.

"Patrick, don't let that bitch call the cops," Ashley said to me, hands clasped in prayer. "Patrick, I have thousands of dollars in dope in my pockets," she said, smiling now, fingering the bags at the tops of her pockets where I could see them. "There's another two grand in the car Max is driving. This is the deal. This is the one. This homeless shit is over. I'll leave him, what ever, but let me finish this."

"I don't know what to say," I said.

"I'll go to jail if they arrest him. I'll go to jail. That's my dope, that's my car. I think I have a warrant."

"I don't know what to say," I said again.

I went and found Mandy to try to articulate Ashley's wishes to her. Mandy had googled a women's shelter. In the MidWest they are still called 'Battered Women's Shelters.' We called the one in Cincinnati and went straight to the answering machine. NewPort Kentucky's glamorous webpages begging for holiday donations in the name of homeless women and children also yielded no actual help. Just pictures of the happy homeless graciously accepting warm fluids and scarves. Us, calling in desperate need, couldn't even get warm fluids or scarves at this time of night. The women's crisis line directed us to call 911. Mandy seemed undeterred. She pulled up google. The glory of Google... it's like screaming questions at the ocean. It's idiot indifference we interpret as our not asking the question right. Mandy rearranged the words several times in the search bar. "Homeless Kentucky assault emergency Cincinnati... Spousal abuse Kentucky homeless..." Mandy adjusted her glasses, looked angrily at me again and refocused on google. She typed an 'H' prompting autofill to suggest the same futile words again. And again google yielded a list of websites asking for money. The shelter around us wheezed, coughed and farted as our guests slept in the cramped building. "What would you do in Portland?" Mandy asked.

"Honestly the same thing we are doing right now," I said. Really Ashley would have been kicked out of the shelter before this had happened. Shelters in Portland Oregon were these weird immaculate farcical hospitals where an artificial 'protocol' made it impossible to advocate for or interact with the homeless. Sentinel stoned hypocrites manned expensive Macbooks and threw out people of color for making them nervous. Can you tell I'm bitter? I worked in those shit bag shelters for years. I jumped at the chance to move to Kentucky but found myself drunk in a Kentucky bar (smoking indoors again!) realizing I didn't have a single marketable skill besides working in a shelter. "I'd probably be googling shit there too."

"This can't be all there is. I'm calling the cops," Mandy said, picking up the phone.

"She says she has a few thousand dollars worth of heroin on her, some in the car and an active warrant. She wants me to tell you that and I think you should know that... because I know it. And if the cops come and take her to jail for asking for help I don't want you to beat yourself up over it. I've just seen it before and I beat myself up over it. Just so you know," I blurted.

Mandy looked at the phone in her hand for a moment. "Fuck," she finally concluded and walked back to the kitchen.

Ashley was facing the wall. Her back was to us. It smelled like burning rubber. Mandy sniffed the air, then her features became ashen. Infact, I caught in her glare the unmistakable glint of a human being about to fight. I looked again at Ashley, her back was still to us. I glanced back at Mandy. Her hands curled into fists again. "Let's go smoke," I said.

The shelter faced the Cincinnati skyline. Our tiny building sort of cowered under the once great city. The Ohio River was like a moat protecting the Queen city from the conflicted mess of Kentucky. "She's smoking crack," Mandy said. "Right there in the goddamn kitchen."

Dear reader, have you ever had a Kentucky's Best cigarette? They come in all varieties. The pack I discovered in a deli-taxidermist in Falmouth Kentucky were the 'non-filters.' These amazing cigarettes were made on tobacco processing equipment salvaged from junk heaps and auctions in the 80's. Even the packaging had a nostalgic feel. I held the tiny package to the street lamp above to again appreciate it. They smoke quickly too, so you feel like you have mighty youthful lungs. I considered telling Mandy about them, but figured this wasn't the right time.

"I just can't believe she's in there smoking crack," Mandy said.

"She's in a lot of pain," I said. I wondered if what she showed me in her pockets was crack, not heroin. It only mattered in as much as the value of the contents of her pockets.

"I know how all this shit works, Patrick," Mandy said. "I have smoked crack with a black eye more than once," she said. I think in these

situations people think I should have some insight... some time worn approach that will yield safe results for everyone. Mostly I thought about the ghosts of drinks past while waiting for the shift to end. I was grateful for the strange Kentucky cigarettes I was holding. Mandy was aware I was placating her like a shelter guest. "She was smoking crack. What do we do?" she asked again

I consulted my cigarette, then my eyes followed a truck passing in the night. Mandy scrutinized my face, perhaps to punch me instead of Ashley. She misinterpreted my eyes following the truck "Fuck, Max is still out here. Was that Max?"

I shrugged.

"Jesus. Well we can't throw her out." Mandy agreed with a thought I had not yet had. "But he has everything she owns." Mandy drew on her own cigarette. She was a tomboyish woman. She looked a lot like Thelma from Scooby Doo, if Thelma was a brawler. It goes without saying Thelma too was a recovering addict, a recent GI bill degree in tow, out to save the world. "Fucking, drugs and guns," she concluded. "No question there's shit in that truck that will put her in jail. Why did she have to smoke crack though?"

"It's Christmas," I said. I would have missed the crack had Mandy not pointed it out to me. Partially because crack wasn't as big in Oregon, partially because I wasn't looking for it... I mean I purposefully ignore as much as possible. It's how shelters work best. I resumed my position of head down and thinking of the ghosts of drinks past. I genuinely liked Ashley. She cried about her kids. She worked the day labor places within 25 miles that didn't drug test. It was a pleasure to allow her into the shelter donations closest to steal whatever she needed.

"So if I met me... a few years back. What would I have done, said." Mandy asked the street light, as if it were google. She had to ask the street light, they don't have oceans in Kentucky.

"Well?" I wanted to know the answer.

"Honestly I sleep on my friend's couch. I don't have anything for her, I don't even have a fucking couch of my fucking own" Mandy said.

"I think I need to quit this job," I said again for the seven thousandth time in the last ten years. I really did mean it this time. Mandy was peering into the street lamp for answers. I had stopped doing that... looking for answers. If anywhere an answer to any question were to appear, it would be in a Kentucky street lamp on Christmas eve when it's below freezing. Tiny snowflakes lingered in the yellow glow. I had nothing left to ask. "I also think we need to just get her through the night."

"Is it tough love to kick her out?" Mandy wondered aloud, still peering into the streetlamp. "I guess she already is 'kicked out,' she lives in a homeless shelter." Apparently the street light had answered her question. We spent the rest of the night trying on clothes with Ashley in the donations closet, carefully avoiding the subjects of heroin, crack, homicide and jail. Christmas morning came and Ashley promised us she was going to the hospital. As neither Mandy and I had a car to take her in, we took her word for it.

Christmas Night was a shit show. Insincere decorations, people coming to the shelter door with useless tiny donations expecting Instagrammable moments of appreciation. The ugly glory was exemplified in the handmade baked goods. Naturally we couldn't serve them unless they were from a commercial kitchen. From the fat ladies' hands of 4th Baptist of Boone county, through the shelter to the kitchen they went where they were summarily dunked in the trash with a satisfying thud. And so many many hugs. From bosses, coworkers, volunteers... absolutely terrible. I've always found a hug to be a dominance play. The hugger asserts their dominance firstly by the non consensual physical act. Secondly by proving to you how disgusting you smell by flaunting their perfumed, medicated and makeup-caked necks. Post-hug you inventory your sweaty armpits, rotten breath and obvious hangover.

The bars were releasing their holiday crowds back onto the streets. People swayed and poked at phones, waiting for Ubers in the freezing cold. I rounded the corner where the shelter stood and a similar crowd milled across the street.

"Patrick, get your ass over here," Juan said. He and several other shelter alumni were posted up in a shop front door. "What the fuck man. They kicked us out, said we left the shelter a mess," Juan said, frowning. "I'm about sick of this shit, I wouldn't have fucked around with this place,

would be at my camp if I knew about this shit. Changing rules and shit.” Juan often sat at my desk all night making intricate pen drawings of either bible quotes or cartoon tigers. His lazer focus, egged on by meth, reminded me of John the Revelator writing the book of Revelation and all it’s apocalyptic visions. Though with Juan there would be four cartoon tigers... “Seriously, they keep changing the god damned rules. Down at the river it’s the same every night. That’s safer, family. Here they lure your ass in, get your ass comfortable, then throw you the fuck out after Christmas.”

I heard a few similar complaints from others hunched over in the cold. I looked over at the squat dark building. Being the only emergency shelter for a few miles, it gave the administrator terrifying power to yield on a whim. I had not yet worked at a shelter where folks weren’t persecuted within hours of the passing of Christmas for having too much stuff, and this place was no different. “I need to quit this fucking place,” I said, braced myself and went inside.

Diane, one of the swing staff, was packed and ready to go. The half empty shelter smelled of cleaning supplies. “Remember the boss is meeting someone from the newspaper to do a story here tomorrow, can you clean the kitchen?” she said then disappeared out the back door, looking away from the populated street of shelter alum as she made it to her car. Mandy arrived fifteen minutes late in a vegative cloud of pot stench. “We gotta clean the kitchen I said.”

The kitchen overflowed with donations. Turkeys, confectionery, fruits, pies stared at us through the glass cooler doors. Danny, an Air Force vet, wandered into the kitchen. I could see our three reflections in the cooler door. All three of our jaws hung open. We all looked terrible. Mandy was the first to reach for food. Quickly we all were surrounded by open tupperware and lewdly posed turkey carcasses. I fed my hangover, Mandy’s munchies raged strong and Danny Ambien ate. When one of us lost momentum or finished a plate, scrutinizing the other’s plate led to discovering new food combinations and revived the will to eat.

Mandy exhaled heavily and threw away her paper plate. “I’m going to go do rounds... and take a shit,” she said and wandered out into the dark halls.

“There’s a nice lady,” Dale said. Dale was a compact, spry man. He had a military bearing, perfect posture and was respectful to everyone he met.

He also was wearing red footie pajamas with an ass flap and had the habit of spilling military secrets when he took his sleep medication. Tonight he was high as hell on his sleep medication, shoveling marshmallow salad in his face. “Is she a lesbian?”

“I don’t know... I haven’t thought about it,” I said, knowing full well she was a lesbian. “Have you heard of the Bechtel test?” I asked. Dale and I often watched TV for hours together and talked about movies.

“I’m not sure,” Dale said.

“It’s a thing in movies... if the female characters only talk about men it means it fails this test,” I said.

“What else would they talk about?” Danny asked.

A silence fell between us as I couldn’t think of anything besides women... or movies to talk about. Was I failing the test? What the fuck else was there to talk about?

“I saw Portrait of a Woman on Fire,” Dale said. I had not seen the critically acclaimed movie about women and love though NPR was buzzing about it.

“How did you like it?” I asked.

“I mean, I felt weird, sitting alone in the theater watching it. I looked at the young kids in the theater watching it and I thought they were thinking, I bet that dirty old man lives in a homeless shelter... and they were right. I wanted to see Parasite but they were sold out. Apparently that has nothing to do with a giant bug either. I don’t know. I wouldn’t take my daughter to Woman on Fire, but I hope she sees it,” Dale took another piece of pie. “I sent Brian a care package in jail. I guess they get ramen and some gummy bears.” Brian was Danny’s son. He had stayed at the shelter before going back to jail on possession charges. I imagined it was gratifying as a father to get your adult son something as childlike as gummy bears and have them so appreciated.

“I’m glad he’s safe. It’s cold out there,” I said. I was considering the nasty irony of our feast while so many shelter alums sat cold and hungry outside

when Mandy re-appeared. "Gladys is sleeping in the middle of the floor," Mandy remarked and casually picked up a cookie.

"So, are you married?" Dale asked clumsily. It was baby boomer for 'are you a lesbian.'

"No, are you?" Mandy responded, fixing her Buddy Holly glasses and dipping her cookie in whipped cream.

"I was... of course. You met my son... I mean. Not that you have to get married to have a son, but it helps. She is somewhere in New York. My wife is, not my son. My son is in jail. She left the kids and took the microwave, my wife did. The 80's were weird like that. Microwaves were like 500 dollars? Can you imagine? Anyway, she sent me a divorce paperwork packet thing like every six months for years. I just tore it up every time. One year... Christmas in fact. I remember getting it in the mail and thinking, you know what, 'Merry Christmas bitch' and signing it. So I was married. To a woman... once" Danny said.

"My parents are still together. It's kinda dumb," Mandy remarked. "How the fuck am I ever going to find that? I can find someone to tolerate me for a few months... but 40 fucking years?

"Miles and Ashley have been together ten years... hey are they here tonight?" Dale asked, not knowing about the events of the other night.

"No, apparently they kicked a lot of people out last night," I said. Danny lowered his eyes. We two low testosterone men knew we were ignoring a great injustice of the mass expulsion, so many comrades on the street a few hundred feet away.

"What the fuck," Mandy said, considering the remnants of our feast in disgust as if she had been tricked into eating human flesh. "They kicked out a bunch of people? Like how many?"

"Ten or so." Dale said. The director came in and said the building was filthy. She said she wasn't running any flop house.

"What the fuck," Mandy reiterated.

Danny and I had let her down as much as Ashley had let her down the other night by smoking crack in the kitchen. I was so glad I wasn't young like her anymore. It hadn't been too many years ago I shook my tiny fists at the shitty racist shelters of Portland Oregon. It was soon going to be 2020 and I was far more like Danny at that point in my life than Mandy, god bless her, may she inherit the shelters. "What the fuck, they threw them out because the shelter was messy?" Mandy repeated.

"I guess there are going to photographers here tomorrow," I sheepishly said realizing it was men like Danny and I that made being a Lesbian an obvious and attractive alternative lifestyle. Mandy shook her head and started to clean the kitchen with a cold deliberate pace.

"Man, look at the time," Danny said. "Guess I can be first in the shower, can you put me on the list?" he asked.

"Sure thing," I said as Dale and I scurried from the kitchen. I went to the front desk. It was a spot that was supposed to be manned at all times but I usually avoided it at all cost. Stupid shelter rules mandated no one could enter after 9pm and despite the shelter being half full, the sub zero temperatures, and the constant throbbing need in the city, we just wernt allowed to let people in. That sentry spot at the desk next to the phone meant you could watch the voicemail box fill with desperate messages from people over the domestic-abuse-decorated holidays. Anyway this shelter was as fucked as any I had seen on the West Coast. As bad as the sitting at the desk was, it was better than feeling guilty in Mandy's presence as she cleaned that kitchen with bleach and rage.

I heard a scream. Not an angry scream, not the scream of someone being assaulted. The scream cocked and loaded in all of us. The scream we invented our clumsy filthy civilization to hide from. I stood and jogged down the dark hallways. Soon I found a room with a light on. I pushed through a small crowd gathered at the door. Gladys lay on her side in the dim fluorescent light. Getting closer I saw her pupils fixed. Turning her on her back I felt cold urine collected on her back. Her arms were gray and blue as I dragged her onto the floor. Her mouth was covered in spit and bubbles. I wiped it off with my sleeve and pushed two breaths into her ridgid lungs. Her lips were cold and I reapplied her spit to my face, whipping my mouth with my dirty sleeve.

Her sternum cracked as I did compressions. There were distant screams from onlookers. I felt watched; it wasn't Gladys saying goodbye as she left the room but, death coming in. I thought about disease and tried not to puke as Gladys's cold spit dripped down my face. Detached now, I knew Gladys was dead and I knew I had to keep doing CPR to keep a riot of shelter heroes from erupting and desecrating her body with good intentions. I've seldom seen a graceful death in a shelter. I've seen too many times bodies desecrated by would-be heroes. And I've seen those would-be heroes destroyed by guilt, thinking they could have done more. I looked up and saw Mandy's stern gaze. I had to keep going. Stopping would mean I would share this death. I'm not trying to sound like some kind of poetic hero... it's just how it has to be. You own death, it's all you can do.

Gladys was maybe 50. The dead have always looked like mad children to me. That timeless threat the child makes to hold their breath till they die... Pushing in her sternum caused more spit to bubble out. Between breaths I tried to fix her frizzy hair and close her eyes. It all seemed so rude. So rude. I don't know how to describe the irritated rage I was feeling.

Eventually a cop came up behind me and tapped me out. He looked into Gladys eyes, checked her pulse and shook his head. Then I noticed Ashley looming above, bruised face smeared in tears. Another officer guided me and her out of the room.

I left Mandy to regulate and went outside to smoke. I thought about how beautiful Jameson was in the morning and how gorgeous a beer was to chase it down. Like a young couple on their wedding day, the small strong feminine shot, the lumbering dumb groom beer. So pure, so happy. I am being real with you, drinking after a graveyard shift in a hellhole shelter is a divine experience. Famous writer and intellectual Anne Lamott writes about glimpses of heaven. A shot and a beer, hung over, sleep deprived at the end of a shift... is heaven. Beer, whiskey and me, what a trinity. And I'd actually, finally have someone to drink to.

I didn't feel physically accosted by Ashley's hug however I knew full well it had been her drugs that killed Gladys, her lack of eye contact this time told me. As I did CPR I had sensed her moving through the room, gathering evidence as I had cracked that sternum. Death wore a donated homeless

shelter tracksuit. I again wiped my face with my cadaver spit soaked sleeve.

"I was the last to talk to her, Patrick," Ashley said, her own eyes distant as death. As stupid as this may sound, Gladys death seemed important and beautiful, like a reason to enjoy my own life. Ashley and I hugged again, consensually, and in the spirit of the season. Were we celebrating? The guilt was hitting me. See, folks, this is why I wrote this fucking book. I honestly don't know what to feel about what I saw and did over the years. I just need you to know these bloodstained tragedies probably happen down the street from where you live. At your local homeless shelter.

Ashley and I composed ourselves and considered the day ahead of us. The ugly truth was, when the word of an OD made it around town... that there was good heroin out there, there would be some stiff demand for the product. Our rude species' reverence for the dead played out by standing next to the void, on the same drug... or making a living like I did in the name of homelessness, or maybe paying your mortgage on a coroner's salary. I had to untangle the incident reports... police questions. Arnold, the shelter manager, did not answer his phone. He slept through it all, facing his own terrible Trazodone nightmares. I realized I was holding Ashley's hand. I dropped it and turned away.

When it was finally over and the shelter was again empty for the day, I felt too tired to drink. "Wanna go get drunk?" I asked Mandy. She sneered at me and flashed her AA coin. Its gleam gave me the will to drink again. "Sucker," I said.

## Authenticity

It had been a joyous homecoming. Had it been in another setting, somewhere else besides a homeless shelter, it would have been the type of thing you'd see on a holiday commercial for butter or maybe cars or tampons or... Tired dad poking at coffee, sees son through snowy window. Dad stoically welcomes son inside, they exchange awkward man noises until they break down and hug. Dale and Brian did all of this, only under the dim flickering neon lights of homeless shelter. And although they spent the evening catching up, Brain was distracted. We three watched the origin

Star Trek in lulls in the conversation. Brain kept glancing at his phone. Dale shoveled cereal into his mouth, eyes distant and unfocused as his sleep medicine numbed parts of his brain. I was engrossed in the episode. It was the one where Kirk travels back in time to work at a homeless shelter on earth. It had been so long since I had seen it, it was new to me.

"Christmas I spent with your sister. I spent the night. Her kids are huge. They call me Pee Pa," Dale said.

"Why do they call you that?" Brain asked.

"You know, that's a good question. I don't think I peed on anything. I could have though. You know I'm never quite sure what this guy here gets up to at night after my meds kick in," Dale said, pointing at himself with his thumbs. He was in his night time outfit of red full body PJ's with a but flap. "Did you get my package?"

"Yes Sir. Jolly Ranchers and Ramen go a long way in jail dad, thank you." Maybe we were in a TV ad for Jolly Ranchers and Ramen.

"If I could have chosen, I would have gotten you something else of course," Dale said. "Those were the only options on the website."

"Oh, I know. And I know it's the most expensive thing on there too," Brain said.

"Is this the one where Kirk goes back in time?" Dale asked me.

"It looks like it," I said.

"Watch this," Dale said and like a sorcerer, gestured at the TV. Doctor McCoy fell on his futuristic hypodermic and immediately started acting weird. "Can you believe that?" Dale said as McCoy fought off the crew and escaped down to the planet's surface. "They will have meth in future," Dale laughed.

"No way," Brian said, staring in disbelief at the TV.

"Do you still have your social security card? You could probably start tomorrow at the airport," Dale said.

"I think I know too many people out there, you know what I mean?" Brian said. "I was thinking of working downtown somewhere. It's less money but I don't think I am ready for the airport," Brain said.

"Your sister asked about you. Well, I brought you up. She had the speech about me enabling you, which I think is hilarious. I'm fucking homeless. How do I enable you? If I was giving you money or something I think that would count as enabling. Maybe going back in time, I guess I can see it, maybe I should have beat the shit out of you fifteen years ago or something," Dale said, shoveling cereal into his mouth. "But we're grown ass men now. When they say, 'it is what it is...' this IS what it IS, ya know?" Dale stood and lifted his leg over the bench seat revealing the one unbuttoned button on his butt flap footie pajamas as he turned to go pee.

"Got a smoke?" Brian asked, smiling at his dad's ass. "I came right here from jail, I didn't have time to stop for any."

The snow was heavy and wet as it fell on the parking lot and melted into the black asphalt. I gave Brian one of my Kentucky's Best cigarettes that I had recently come to worship.

"What is your accent anyway?" Brain asked, lighting the cigarette I gave him.

"Oregon, I guess," I said, blowing smoke towards the Cincinnati skyline.

"No disrespect, but you kinda sound like Ernie, from Burt and Ernie. Not like childish or whatever, but it's the closest thing I can think of. I mean, living here, you think about that shit accents. Once you cross the Ohio River, you switch your accent. I mean, think about it. During the civil war, the Ohio River was a fucking international boarder."

"I've noticed that," I said. Drinking at Junker's Tavern in Cincinnati, then going to Hotspots Bar in Covington Kentucky was like traveling in space and time, even though they were a few minutes drive apart. Kids at Junkers wore, in the hipster spirit, the clothes that people generally wore at Hotspots in Kentucky, however they wore them ironically at Junkers... Trucker hats and flannels were worn at the Hipster bar AND they were worn at the Kentucky dive. Confused about fashion? You should be.

"I've always wanted to go to Oregon," Brain said. "Standing on one of those fucking mountains, doesn't it feel like your gonna fall and not stop falling for hours?" Another shelter guest walked up and Brian and he exchanged a hand shake. "Thanks for this," Brian said and followed him into the shelter.

Spock was on TV collecting wires and broken radios from the trash when I sat back down with Dale. "He's trying to make a computer," Dale said. "They traveled back in time and now are in a homeless shelter in 1930's America."

"Well that's eerily appropriate," I said, thinking of the many many geeked out people's hoards of broken electronics I had encountered in shelters over the years.

"Kirk has a crush on the lady running the shelter," Dale said. "The doctor is addicted to drugs. This is a fucking good one."

I watched for a while, ignoring the shelter phone ringing, barely believing my senses. "This is almost too weird to watch," I said.

"Do you think they had homeless shelters in 2265?" Dale asked.

"Man, you think they would after all the shit they go through," I said.

"In the Wrath of Kahn some fucked up shit happens. That movie gave me nightmares. Some of the crew members must have returned to Earth and were like, what the fuck do we do now?" Dale said. "Weird to think of Kirk as a Vet. Like, if he lost his mind and ended up on the streets, would he still wear that uniform? I can picture him on the freeway onramp, wearing his starfleet uniform, asking for change. He'd have a sign that said, 'I endured the Wrath of Kahn,' or some shit."

"Wasn't the Wrath of Kahn based on an L. Rohn Hubbard story?" I asked.

"Oh shit, I think you're right. In Oregon or someshit, he was supposed to have had an epic battle with a Japanese sub. Only no one on the crew could confirm it happened. It sounds like he was just bat shit shit crazy, hunting some sub that no one could prove existed. Dumping shit out the torpedo

tubes and telling everyone to be silent. I mean you can't question orders, you just have to obey in that situation," said Dale.

"It's convenient in war we never see the enemy anymore," I said. "We never get to look through the periscope, man" I said, mocking the gravity of what I had said.

Brian rejoined us. He was pale and smirking. You could tell the angels were singing in his ears. "How was Christmas?" he asked.

"We went to church, it was nice. We wished you were there. We should go to church on Easter, You me and your sister," Dale said, distantly smiling, cereal tumbling down his red pajamas. "It's so good to have you home" he said, hugging Brian and patting him on the back.

Dale, Brian and I watched as Captain Kirk saw his love die outside the homeless shelter. Gradually Mccoy kicked drugs enduring some violent Dts and Spock succeeded in making a supercomputer out of ancient garbage. When they returned to the enterprise, no one could comprehend what they had been through. Kirk, Spock and McCoy had to deal with the memories of the homeless shelter for the rest of their lives. Christ, I wondered if they ever talked about it. I imagine not. Men talk about anything but what they are going through. When the episode finally ended, I rubbed my eyes. I was no Trekkie but that was some good shit. I stretched and took a deep breath, then looked around at our homeless shelter. The only thing that had changed from the 1930's to now was the stupid computers. I saw Brian slumped forward, his head in his arms.

"I have to go to bed," Dale said, struggling to untangle himself from the bench and table he was sitting at. "Goodnight son, good to have you home," he said before plodding away in his red footie pajamas, box of cereal in tow.

"I guess I better find you a bed," I said to Brian, looking over the shelter bed list. There were more than a few open spots due to a recent purge by management. "I can put you in 15,"

Brian didn't move. I raised his head, his eyes were open and his mouth was foaming. I gave him a shake, his head flopped around like the big sack of meat it was. His head made a heavy bang as it hit the table when I let go of him to go get the Narcan. Raising his head again I used his hoodie to clear

his nostrils and gave him a shot of Narcan in each nostril. I thought of Dr. Mccoys handy 'hypo' thing as I prepared myself for mouth to mouth rescue breathing. I considered Brian's unshaven face, cracked lips and I wondered if this was what girls felt when kissed against their will. I lowered him backwards onto the shelter floor and was positioning his head for CPR when I heard him breathing. His eyes began to try to focus. Relieved, I stood up and sat on the bench next to him. I swept some of Dale's stray cereal into my hands then poured it into the empty Narcan box.

"Fuck," Brian finally said. "Fuck," he reinterated.

"Can you make sure I am up by 4:30am?" Dale asked, having suddenly reappeared. "I took my medication earlier and I don't want to sleep through my alarm."

"Sure," I said.

"You have a good night," Dale said, not noticing his son on the floor as he disappeared back into the shelter.

The Narcan was robbing Brian of his high while saving his life. As the heroin lost the war in his body, he lay on his side mourning it's retreat. Star Trek the Next Generation was starting on the TV. I turned it off and waited with Brian for him to be able to walk to bed.

After everyone was safely in bed,I went outside to smoke a cigarette and call my own father. He didn't answer. Holding my tiny mute phone beneath the silence of the Cincinnati skyline at 4am I felt lonely. Considering the nebula of the stars, peering at the satellites sparkle as they passed I had a feeling I had talked to him for the last time.

I was right. My father had a stroke and I was headed back to Portland Oregon to watch him die. It was a solemn drunk journey, through the tent lined streets of my youth. Downtown had lost its wonder, every music store, every book store I had ever loved, were closed forever (Fuck Powells Books). Dad didn't regain consciousness in time for a formal farewell. I played Steely Dan on my phone as he slipped away. Then he was gone. I watched the naked country pass beneath the plane as I headed back to the midwest. Every inch irrigated and subdivided, it's rivers and mountains the backdrops for AirBnb's I could never bother to afford, America's last

wilderness is now the biome of our invasive species. The miracle of our technology was allowing me to sip cheap wine from a tiny cardboard box, 40,000 feet in the air, to boldly go where everyone must go someday.

When I got back to the shelter I learned Brian had ODed. Covid protocols could have been to blame for the sparse funeral attendance. Dale was nervous like a father at a kid's band recital. Although Brian lay in a coffin behind him, he seemed to be furtively expecting him to walk in at any moment. I looked at my phone to pass the time, but no one was going to call me. Distracted and bearing the weight of our private hells, Dale and I stood there.

## Teeth

"Eventually you run out of them," Dino said, smiling, showing his flat empty gums. There were outlines still where some teeth had recently left. "The trick is not closing your mouth all the way. Then you look like an old man in a cartoon. That's the trick."

I had taken to grinding my teeth at night when my ex-wife took my son. For a while I could make it through my job at the school, I could scrape up the money for the court petitions, I told myself, just power through, this will be over some day. In the morning, if I slept at all, I sometimes found pieces of teeth stuck to my tongue. When I found myself alone with my thoughts on a lunch break, I realized my jaw was taught, grinding. Sometimes I'd hear a pop and a bigger piece would fall out for me to spit into the trash of some grade school. As work became harder and harder for me to fake it through, as I lost custody case after custody case, the molars wore down. When I had lost the last court case, there didn't seem like a point in dentists. They were far more expensive than bars. However some times I was prone to moments like these; blind, salivating into a shelter sink while someone who had seen far far worse, consoled me over the familiar pain of an abscess.

"Mother fuckers kicked half of them out in jail. Through my fingers, through my hands covering my face. It was fucked up man. You know what the world needs? What I sure as fuck could have used? A homeless dentist. Yeah, think about it. A dude who looks like us, is a little fat... has like a

fucked up sense of humor. So you don't have to feel like a monster going in there. I remember dentists with these beautiful women working in the office. Here I come in smelling like cigarettes, had a couple drinks first because I'm scared bro, and I walk into this dentist's office and there's these beautiful good smelling women in there and I just straight up walk out of there. I didn't even talk to anyone, bro, I just saw those women and said, 'nope,' and ignored the pain till the infection went into my heart. It went into my heart. I've heard of a broken heart, bro, not an infected one, do you know what I'm saying?"

I remembered my last day as a substitute teacher. I had a swollen face and this cracked molar cutting my teeth. It was a long term assignment in a special education classroom. I had done ok battling the cognitive dissonance of the kids challenging a substitute teacher. I had balanced my yelling with praise. But the day the district observer came in, I couldn't think through the toothache. The kids were seated staring at me, the fake fat fuck with a steno pad and a pen making notes was staring. It occurred to me that they won. Every childhood needs a memory of a substitute teacher cracking. I broke. I thought of my ex-wife laughing in court when she won. I walked out.

"Get a dentist like us, a guy who knows what's up. I had this one tooth, it was killing me. I did some heroin. They took my blood pressure at the dentist and it was too low so they wouldn't pull it. It was like I was cheating or something. They gave me antibiotics. Man, I didn't know what the fuck those were. I took like five and lost them. I finally smoked some crack and went back. I remember them asking me what level my pain was and laughing and shit and saying it was like a nine. They thought I was crazy. But seriously, dentistry is scary enough, why are all dentists either like a high school principal or like a health teacher, someone you let down when you were growing up. Then when you go in to get some dental work done, they're all, 'see I told you so.'"

I bring up the bullshit about my cliche divorce because that's what I thought about as the waves of pain rolled up my temple into my brain. I was thinking about the things you are still living for. And how those things are never going to get better and you still have twenty seven steps you have to go through to get the tooth pulled; you have to request the time off to see the dentist to get the antibiotics to wait to see the office person who negotiates a payment plan for you to see the dentist who sends you home

because you are shaking too much to pull the thing. I remembered the words of a dishwasher who reminiced about the brothels in Vietnam who would conclude most stories with the statement, 'when suicide gets easier than living, you wont see me around anymore,' and how that made sense in that moment. There was a pool of spit in the sink, drooling and dangling from my mouth. The steps it took and the money I had to pay to see my son... the steps and money needed to fix these teeth when the first step, surviving this moment in time was impossible.

"In the service, bro, it was different. You could get in trouble for fighting, like dropped or recycled. So fighting was surgical. You set people up to make it seem consensual, like you both were just disagreeing about some shit, when really you had a plan all along. You didn't want to get discharged or something. But everyone had a dentist in the service. In prison though... you know you are supposed to look people in the eye? The best way to fake that is to look them in the teeth. Pick one out and picture how your gonna knock that mother fucker out. It's like when your dick doesn't get hard anymore, all you want to do is kick other guys' teeth out."

I slurped the spit back in my mouth and straightened up. The men's bathroom had a stale dry heavy smell to it. Shit and cologne. Dino followed me as I left and stepped outside to smoke a cigarette.

"In prison though, like I was saying, everyone wants to kick everyone's teeth out. It's like a compulsion, bro. It didn't make sense at first, like I was saying, they're kicking you in the mouth when you're on the ground, covering your face. It doesn't make sense and you are all like, wow, here I am, in prison, getting my teeth kicked in. Then you see you got less teeth in the mirror, way less than when you were on the outside, back when you were all worried you had like one missing tooth. Now you got missing front teeth. That's a big day, bro, when you are missing front teeth. And it makes you sad as fuck."

When I was young I wanted to be some kind of artist. And my parents encouraged it. That corny dream came in handy times like these. I looked at the purple light pollution over the Cincinnati skyline. I looked at Dino's face flashing by the light of his Bic, his narrow toothless mouth carefully balancing a cigarette between his lips, and for a moment I forgot about the rotten nerve, the bacteria laded black broken tooth in my head.

"Your sitting there on your bunk thinking, wow. What's the fucking point? Ten more years getting your teeth kicked in, in prison. I should off myself bro. It's the saddest loneliest feeling. Nighttime in jail, trying to cry softly so no one comes and kicks your teeth in. Night time, bro... your mom isn't in the other room, she's not going to come in and pick you up and put you on your shoulder. But then something happens to change everything. You see a motherfucker, you see his tooth and you knock that thing out. You feel it break in his mouth. You did it. Is that assault? Is that a favor? Because, think about it, the guys who kicked my teeth out, like a week later are sitting with me at meals. Is that fucked up? Or is it normal? I remember smiling and laughing with the mother fucker who had stomped my teeth out and seeing he was missing fucking teeth. It's fucked up, but it's funny."

They describe difficult things as being 'like pulling teeth,' which makes no sense to me, unless you're a dentist. Even then I imagine pulling the teeth is one of the easier tasks they have. Writing these rotten little stories about shelter life is like 'like pulling teeth,' or maybe more like 'getting teeth pulled.' There's a crack in one of my memories. And it's bothering me. It's getting worse. I have to pull up a blank white word processing document and stare at it. It seems the more I think about it, the worse it gets. The rot, the neglect, the decay are the details to the story. Maybe, just maybe, if someone helps me out by editing the story, I can get the tooth out, publish the story, and get to work on the next rotten tooth. Or some editor or agent can help me by kicking my face in. Instead of sitting at this library computer, I can be in the fetal position on the ground and she/he can aim kicks at my face through my hands and knock one of these self aggrandizing stories out of me. After it's out I'll lay there in a pool of my own piss and blood, relieved and stare up at she/he while smiling through my bloody broken mouth.

"But one day you don't have any more teeth, bro. They pulled the ones I had left, Medicaid paid for it. Blew my fucking mind. I heard about the Medicaid dentist, I made an appointment, and waited a few months. One day they call and make me an appointment. I was working at Amazon, asked for the time off, they said no but I went anyway. I didn't smoke any crack that time. They asked me if I had a ride and I lied. They put me under. I woke up with no fucking teeth. I stumbled out of there with gauze and shit packed in my mouth, drooling blood. I got on the bus and went home. I remember looking in the mirror and laughing. No teeth bro. They

fit me with dentures. It was amazing, I had teeth like in highschool. I was smiling at everyone.”

I resolved to get the tooth pulled. I would not get drunk after work, make the call to the dentist like a big boy. It was a pain in the ass, but easier than trying to kill myself. Killing yourself took problem solving, breaking the act down into steps. You have to walk our ass to the bridge. You have to walk on the shoulder of the road, knowing people are looking at you, wondering if you are going to jump. Fuck, I’d just call the dentist instead. Who knows, maybe the dentist would give me some pills and I could pound out a short story or two while the weak opiate buzzed in my brain. Maybe one about Dino so we wouldn’t be completely forgotten once he was cremated. As is, I worry when I am cremated, Dino will be completely gone.

“So last week I got drunk and woke up outside. I checked my pockets: yup I still got my phone, yup I still got my wallet. But something felt wrong. Then I realized, shit, I lost my god-damed, mother fucking teeth. I called the dentist and he said I got to wait 8 years for another pair otherwise it’s four thousand dollars. That fucked me up for a minute. But then I thought, fuck it. I went and got a job again. I’m gonna save up for teeth. I mean knowing me it’s going to take eight fucking years to save four thousand dollars, but what ever. Sometimes you need a reason to live, to stay sober, bro. I’m going to get new teeth.”

I guess I’ll continue to work on these grim short stories and save them up for a book. If I publish a book, I can afford dentures.

“We did everything adults would do. What went wrong?”

— William Golding, Lord of the Flies

Ken

Ken thoughtfully considered the torn up street as the bus idled on a turnout overlooking the Licking River. There were spray painted symbols on the ruts and holes in the asphalt. The school bus idled nervously and the exhaust spewed a cloud of steam that twirled through the beams of the

head lights. A thin blood red line of light above the trees signaled dawn's arrival. Ken's face was illuminated by the many lights on the school bus dashboard. He had leathery red skin from decades of sun, beer and MidWest winters. His mind hummed like the diesel motor of the bus. His deliberate world weary demeanor made me squirm.

"That means water and gas," Ken said. "They marked those three years ago, I don't think they're ever going to dig them up."

"I wondered what those symbols on the road meant," I said, lying, noticing them for the first time. "How do you know what they mean?"

"I worked at Duke Energy for 32 years. Right out of the Army. I drive a bus for health insurance," Ken said. "I tore up and patched electricity lines, gas lines, phone lines. I can't help but think how to fix the things I see, the ruts in the road. I don't know, it takes my mind off the job."

I had been a bus monitor for a few weeks now. Ken's route took high school kids to in-school suspension. It was a white knuckle affair, much like working in a shelter. I had seen a few fights, but so far they had happened while the kids were getting off the bus. I was intimidated. Every kid carried a camera on their phone, there were three cameras on the bus and no protocol for intervening in fights that I knew of. When Ken felt we were losing control of the crowd, he usually stopped the bus and put on the hazard lights and waited. I think this worked because the kids knew the people walking by on the street, often recognized by people in traffic.

"I am definitely not doing this route next year, I did my three years. Maybe they'll have you driving by then," Ken said, putting the bus in gear. "I wonder when they are going to cancel school for the pandemic anyway. My wife has been buying everything she can get her goddamn hands on. All the toilet paper and bottled water she can find. She filled the closet full of canned shit. She wants to be ready for the worst I guess... I told her, `If you didn't drink so much goddamned bottled water, you wouldn't have to shit so much. She didn't think that was funny. ''

We cruised down Madison, the skyline of Cincinnati backlit by dawn. We were expected at our first stop at 6:50 am. Stopping at a doorway, a few kids solemnly boarded the bus, not looking up from their phones. I assumed my position in the middle of the bus, holding a school issued flip phone. We

passed the shelter I had quit from a few weeks earlier. I recognized Dale getting into his car to head to work at the airport. I craned my neck to watch him as he disappeared. A heavy feeling in my gut told me I had bailed on another father figure. We stopped a few blocks later, picked up a few more kids. They reeked of Black and Mild blunts and mildew.

At the corner of 12th and Madison we stopped and picked up our largest group of kids. The bus energy instantly transformed from quiet and dark into rolling deafening chaos. Kids paired off, shouted greetings and sat on their knees facing the wrong way in their seats while having yelled conversations across the bus. I made my mumbled protests and muffled threats, walked the aisle asking kids to be seated or I'd have to do absolutely nothing to punish them. Suddenly the bus went silent. Looking around I saw all of the kids pointing their camera phones. I followed the camera's aim to see two young ladies with hands firmly wrapped in each other's hair, tugging and convulsing. One of them managed to pry a fistfull of hair and began pounding the other in the face with their own hair. I saw blood either from a face wound or the roots of the hair, I wasn't sure which, however this beating created some separation between the two and I covered my eyes and dove between them, my flabby middle-aged bulk breaking their grip momentarily. But soon I sunk between them all the way to the floor and I could feel them resume their battle above me. Ken put the bus in park causing the emergency lights to turn on. Briefly I felt at rest, lying on my side, examining the twenty or so pairs of shoes. I could see down the length of the bus, the backpacks and legs of the chairs cast weird shadows in the flashing orange light. A pencil rolled towards my face. It came to a stop and I couldn't confirm whether it was a real #2 pencil or not. A shoe with the full weight of a 15 year old behind it landing on the side of my head brought me back to my senses and I tried to drag myself to a standing position. I panicked when tiny hands with fake nails raked across my face. While attempting to stand, I managed to hoist one of the young women into the air on my back. She resumed her attack from the high ground of my shoulders, grabbing and tearing at the other girl who's rage now seemed directly aimed at me. Her eyes were wild, her nose wrinkled with teenaged murder. Her mouth exposed many fillings on the back teeth when she screamed.

I had had enough. I decided to quit. I moved forcefully towards the front door of the bus. The two women continued their barrage on each other over and around me as I made my way. When I reached the front of the bus, Ken

threw a basketball pick, causing the lady behind me to disengage and the one in front of me to fall into a seat. Now separated by two ugly and large humans, the ladies were content to scream threats at each other.

I caught Ken's eye and asked, "should I call 911?"

"Sure," he said.

After five or so minutes of the young ladies lunging at each other, an officer appeared at the door of the bus. I swear he rolled his eyes when he recognized me from the shelter. I wonder if he had swapped shifts to try to escape me and my ludicrous crises.

"Step off the bus, sir," he said to me.

I looked over to Ken for guidance. He gestured for me to follow the officer. At the sight of the officers the two young ladies had gone quiet and were both sitting with their arms crossed, panting like tigers in the sun.

Getting off the bus I saw we were blocking the intersection between Madison and 12th beneath the weird copy of the Notre Dame Cathedral that neighborhood was famous for. Traffic squeezed by us, their drivers pointing camera phones. "What's going on in there," the officer asked.

"Well two young women are fighting, tearing each other's hair out," I said.

"What does the school usually do in situations like this?" he asked.

"I have no idea," I admitted.

"What do you want us to do," the officer asked. "You have to see it my way. All of our training is to expect there to be a hidden weapon on that bus. And there very well could be. But if I get on that bus and one of those ladies assaults me, I have to respond. Taser, zip ties, all of that. Worse even. Will that help anything right now? In the short term or the long run?"

"I have no idea," I admitted. I looked up at the bus. Camera phones were pointed at us through the windows.

"Are the young women sitting down now?" the officer asked.

"I think so," I said.

"Can you just haul ass to school and take it from there?" he asked.

"I have no idea," I said and got back on the bus. Ken sat in the driver's seat. The kids replayed the battle on their phones. I heard my name in the din as something particularly pathetic I had done replayed on a small screen.

"Cops wouldn't do shit," I overheard.

We made it up the hill to where the in school suspension building sat. There was a grand view of the Cincinnati skyline from there. Ken leaned on the wheel and stared at the city. The principal of the school walked the isles of the now quiet bus, dismissing kids one at a time. When all the kids were off the bus, I took a deep breath.

"We'll have them on different buses coming home," the principal said.

"Deer," Ken said, pointing to a grassy area down the hill. We all peered out the window at a group of deer cautiously grazing and making their way across the clearing.

"I'd like to learn how to hunt," the principal said. He produced a radio from his pocket. "Are they all through the metal detector yet?" there was no response. "If they don't answer me, I have to go see what's going on. What happened this morning anyway?"

"I don't know their names, but those two girls were tearing each other to shreds. We called the police, but they wouldn't get on the bus," Ken said. "I'm sure they'll roll the tapes back and tell us what we did wrong."

"Did you put your hands on them?" the principal asked.

"I kept my hands down," Ken said.

"I think I did," I said. "I got between them."

"You have to," the principal said.

"Patrick fell down, I think they stepped on him," Ken said, smiling.

"Are you ok?" the principal asked.

"I'm fine," I said. The deer bounded back into the tree line.

"I better go see what's going on," the principal said and left the bus.

We drove down the hill and parked by The Licking River again. The bus idled nervously as Ken again scrutinized the pavement around us. "Where did you work before this?" he asked me.

"The Emergency Homeless Shelter. The winter is over... and I wanted a less stressful job, so I thought I'd work with school kids." I said.

Ken snorted. "You probably know a lot of these kids' families," he said.

"Yeah, one of the biggest concerns I heard was getting too behind in child support and going to jail," I said. "I guess these are those children."

Ken's phone vibrated. He took it out and put on his reading glasses. "They say we're all over Facebook." He fiddled with his phone for a moment and played a video. I could hear familiar screams. "Do you want to see?"

There I was, fat and middle aged in a sea of screaming swearing children throwing blows. All of the kids around us had their phones pointed at the brawl. It was ugly. Down I went as the crowd cheered. I looked pathetic scrambling to my feet, I looked vulnerable and sad. The girls were all well aware of being recorded and seemed egged on by it. It was one thing to lose a fight growing up before these fucking cameras everywhere, but to lose one on video must be terrifying.

Christ, these kids were the age that during their entire life camera phones had been there, recording their best and making indelible, their worst. What better revenge for being born could they conceive of than instigating violence for the world to be helpless to do anything about, but record. Their entire lives had been staged for shitty pictures for Facebook posts as far back as they could remember. Why not take control of the posts, violently?

Seeing myself humiliated next to their fury... I think I got it. I kinda admired it. This was their big day and neither young women relented. I saw Ken throw his basketball pick and the video focused on my heaving breathing and shifty eyes. It occurred to me that as bad as the homeless shelter was, this was possibly worse.

"Well, we still have to get these little shits home," Ken said, putting the bus into gear and heading back to the bus barn. "They won't suspend us until the end of the day anyway."

"Will they suspend us?" I asked, hopefully.

"No, I got in trouble once for cussing out a kid. They got it on camera. Unless they catch us swearing or using our hands to move or restrain a kid, we're fine. That's what good about jobs everyone else is too big of a coward to do. You get to be a hero by just showing up. Whatever a hero is. Do you have a Facebook?"

"Not really, I mean I had one. Everyone died or got boring," I said. Leaning my cheek on the seat in front of me. It was a familiar posture, even though I hadn't sat that way in 30 years.

"I have some old Army buds on my Facebook. I think quitting drinking was what really killed my social life. I don't regret it, but the wife and I leave the house to go shopping, go to work or go to the casino. I don't know if that's Facebook's fault. It's nice to see pictures of family on there, ya know?" Ken said, his hands firmly on the gently vibrating wheel staring intently down at the driver in front of him stopped at the light. "He's texting." The moment the light turned green, Ken honked the mighty horn of the bus. The driver jumped, throwing their phone in surprise.

We had a few hours before the afternoon run so I drove to Walmart. I sat in my van and watched the pandemic purchases shoved in trunks of cars and steady stream of Walmart trucks negotiate the parking lot to refill the store. The radio murmured and idled like Ken's diesel motor spitting pandemic prognostication and Spanish Flu comparisons. My first few days as a bus monitor dispelled my fear the kids would smell cigarettes last night's booze on me; they themselves reeked of them. Scanning the parking lot there was a chance one of the other men chain smoking in their cars was waiting to

pick up their kid from our bus route. The pandemic inspired magic uncertainty in the air... like Christmas, and the possibility of miracles.

The kids carried shopping bags with them as they got on the bus. Once seated, most put their shopping bags on the floor in front of them. It must have been school work in preparation for the pandemic. It seemed many of them had the same book in their bag, a novel sized paperback. I was squinting at a copy from afar when the first fight broke out. Two young men with wide eyes, shoving at each other's necks, throwing pubescent fists, sometimes connecting blows making a clapping sound. I covered my face and put my body between them. They broke apart and separated. Breathing hard and shaking their heads.

"Is it over? Or are you going back to the building? All of you?" Ken yelled.  
"We can call your parents or aunts or grandmothers or who ever the hell you live with to come get you."

It got suspiciously quiet. Ken put the bus in gear and we began to roll down the hill. I took one last glance at the Cincinnati skyline. Soon we were deep in traffic, a line of cars waiting behind us, a line of cars waiting to merge on the freeway ahead of us, we were boxed in. I glanced at the back of the bus to check out the kid who had been fighting earlier just in time to see him get punched in the ear from behind. As I made my way there, several other boys piled on top of him. Arriving at the back of the bus, the pile looked like some sort of human engine, elbows thrusting like pistons. I found a hole in the pile and dove in, pushing stale smelling bodies apart. The first boy escaped by squirming out from under a seat, his face smeared with blood. He struggled with the emergency exit briefly, punches grazing the back of his head, but managed to open the door and escape out into traffic. A few other boys followed him. They left a trail of smeared blood on the hoods of cars as they ran through the stopped cars.

I realized I was mostly alone in the back of the bus. The kids had rushed forward and were filming another fight, cell phones held high to record like the paparazzi. I shoved my way through the ground, pushing skeletal teen bodies and moving kids via the hoods on their cheap coats. Two girls were locked together, hands in each other's hair, blood streaming from torn out ear rings. They seemed to stop for a moment and I thought of cats playing and their weird pauses before the convulsions of violence resumed. The

girls continued their tugging and screaming again as the crowd screamed in appreciation.

Ken tried to lift one of them, but they were too tightly joined. I tried to unhook their tiny hands from their hair but the opening we made just made it possible for them to kick each other. Ken briefly made eye contact with me before pulling the girl on top with him towards the door, taking them both at once. He had to shove his way through the crowd as he drug the two. When they reached the front of the bus, the girl on top let go and went out into traffic and paced, screaming threats. A crowd of commuters had left their cars and were filming as well. The girl was aware of this and yelled into each camera she could find.

Inside the bus, the kids were still yelling, at each other, out the windows at traffic. Ken sat back in the driver seat and gripped the wheel gazed off into nowhere. Soon the traffic inched along. Kids replayed the fights and shared hotspots to post the footage. I grimly stared out the window until we finally made it to the big stop where most of the kids got off.

“Oh shit,” the kids cried as they saw a brawl in the parking lot where we usually parked. I didn’t look too closely but I did see grown women pulling at each other’s faces. Ken rolled past the stop, heading back to the bus barn.

Some kids were picked up by family members from the bus barn, but most were just released after a few hours as no one could be contacted to collect them. One kid remained and watched me collect the bags full of school work that had been abandoned. I pushed the books and papers from beneath the seats while he kicked them towards the front of the bus.

“What is that book?” I asked, picking a copy up.

“Oh it’s The Giver,” the kid said.

“What’s it about?” I asked.

The kid stopped and thought. “Well, it’s a boring book about this boring place where people are bored,” he summarized.

"He's right," Ken said, while filling out an incident report "I've seen the movie."

"Why do you think they want you to read it?" I asked.

The kid thought for a moment, "probably because they had too many copies."

"Can you stack the books together so we can return them to the school?" I asked.

"No," the kid said and left the bus without saying goodbye. I watched him walk out into the parking lot, poking at his phone.

"On one hand, I grew up here, I was a shit head. I fought too much... I know what it's like. But Christ, there were gyms, there were jobs. There were consequences. I guess there are consequences still; my wife and I started a family too soon and now we can't stand each other. I'm sure there's plenty of that going on... This isn't chaos so much as it's just sad. I don't know why I'm even writing it up. Maybe it helps me to remember what the hell even happened," Ken said. "I probably don't need to remember what happened. It's all on the internet by now."

We collected the books and trash from the bus and clocked out. I grabbed a copy of The Giver and headed home. While I walked toward the bar, I noticed a copy laying in the street at an intersection. Cutting through the Walmart parking lot I saw two more. At the bar I had finished the first chapter when a bar regular sat next to me with the same book.

"I've seen like five copies of this book today, laying in the road, is it any good?"

"It lives up to its reputation," I said, closing it, and sliding it away from me on the bar. "Think we're all gonna gonna die of the Covid?"

"We're all gonna die someday, that's for sure," he said.

If the reward for not working graveyards in a homeless shelter was getting to risk my life in traffic everyday, I was beginning to understand how and why people become homeless again after escaping the shelter. Life is

terrible for every man, woman and child on the planet. Us shelter folks have the rare privilege of admitting it. Daytime folk have to pretend The Giver is a relevant book for scared lonely kids on a bus. Once you've lived shelter life, it's hard to wade back into the ridiculous lies civilization is based on.

It's a hard thing to explain to somebody who hasn't felt it, but the presence of death and danger has a way of bringing you fully awake. It makes things vivid. When you're afraid, really afraid, you see things you never saw before, you pay attention to the world. You make close friends. You become part of a tribe and you share the same blood- you give it together, you take it together.

— Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

## Clinic

"It's 3am when it's hardest. Not the craving but the reality of it. I am supposed to find joy in sobriety, but I just don't. I find myself alone in my parents basement, 45 fucking years old," Maria half laughed. "I do think that if I can get Buddy's ashes, I can get somewhere, some 'closure' or whatever." She made air quotes around the word closure. It's a stupid word, we were in agreement on that fact.

"Where are his ashes?" I asked.

"Crown Memorial in Frankfort," Katie said. "I spoke to the VA, they said they would pay for the cremation, but they need a receipt."

"A receipt?" I asked.

"Yes, they won't just cut me a check, they need a receipt... but the funeral home won't give me Buddy unless I pay them. Do you see? I can't get the receipt unless I pay, I can't get the money without a receipt."

I thought of my boss's Mustang parked out front of the clinic. I wondered what kind of Kentucky flex that was; 'we are the Mustang of drug addiction

clinics.' Surely he could float the cash to get Buddy. "Who have you asked to borrow the money? I don't want to ask the same people," I said.

"I've asked the VA, the Baptists, and the women's shelter," Katie said.

I sat back in my office chair. It made a loud pop noise as some plastic part failed. "How about housing," I asked. "Are you still with your parents?"

"Yes, my mom isn't doing well," Katie said.

"Are you still considering being her caregiver?" I asked.

"Yes, she can't do a lot of things," Katie said.

"Did you take a look at the application to be a family care provider?" I asked.

"Yes, I have that," Katie looked at the time on her phone.

"Well, that's an option for some money," I said.

"I should be getting survivor benefits too. I lived with that man for fifteen years," Katie said.

"Have you spoken to the VA?" I asked.

"Yes, there is a case number," she said.

Our fifteen minutes were almost up and we had only managed to rehash last week's discussion. "This week I am going to contact a legal aide and see what I can do about helping you get Buddy's ashes back," I said, trying to justify my job, to her and myself.

"Ok honey, I'm going to go pee for the doctor and get my meds," she said and left me with the smell of her vanilla body spray.

Years of shelter work had ruined this job for me. It was like being in grade school and reading as a class, a book you had already read and loved. It was excruciating watching my coworkers inch towards the conclusion that was obvious to me. The counselors, the lab techs, the receptionist, the

Physician's Assistant were so reluctant to accept the plot twist coming, no one was taking their meds. They were selling them. The dose was too low, it was cut with Naloxone which ruins a high, and everybody needed the money. Of course they were selling them. God fucking bless them. Selling them was the only honest thing to do when an offered cure for addiction as pathetic as counseling with a bible thumper, an inept case manager and garbage medicine are offered. I guess to admit this pathetic nature, the counselors, the lab techs, the receptionist and the Physician's Assistant would have to admit to themselves they weren't christ-like figures. They had jobs in the junkie economy that were no more important than my job, no more important than the job of Katie... no more important than the job of Buddy. Selling your meds is no more dishonest than buying a Mustang with the profits from a clinic. "It is what it is."

I googled Crown Memorial and pulled up their number. I got a recorded message, "Thank you for choosing Crown Memorial. At Crown Memorial we make it our mission to accompany you and your loved ones on your sacred journey. Please leave a detailed message and we will get back to you shortly."

I hung up, I was not yet prepared to leave a message. I leaned back in my chair which again made a loud popping noise. I took out my business card so I could read my call back number confidently. I took a deep breath and called again.

"Hello, this is Patrick, Katies's case manager at Health Recovery... I was wondering if I could ask a few questions about a problem Katie is having with... a loved one..." The more I knew about HIPPA, the more I was sure making any inquiry using names, words, letters, punctuation or numbers of any kind was a violation.

After hanging up I realized I hadn't left a call back number despite the fact I had been staring at my stupid buisness card. I was about to call again when Katie re-appeared. She was pale and smiling. "Guess what?" she said.

"What" I said.

"I peed for the doctor. Apparently I am pregnant," she said. "I'm forty five fucking years old."

"Well, Jesus Christ," I said.

"I am pregnant and forty five fucking years old," she said again. The smile bled from her face. She held the drug test results solemnly between her knees and stared blankly at them. "How do I take care of it?"

I leaned back in my chair which made a loud popping noise. "Well, there are a lot of options," I said, forgetting for a moment that we were in Kentucky where there were, in fact, very few options.

"How can I take care o

f it?" Katie repeated. This time her inflection confused me.

"I think the first step is seeing an OGB... OGB... O-B-G-Y-N and confirming the test," I said, picturing the half drunk Mtn Dew bottles in the lab refrigerator. God knows what they actually tested.

"I mean, this is insane," she said. "A lady doctor? Is that what an O-F-U-C-K is?"

"An OBGYN can rule out false positive test results," I stammered.

"I have to take care of it," Katie said.

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"I want to take care of it," Katie said.

I thought about the Physician's assistant, the counselors, the lab tech and the receptionist. Somehow I was this poor woman's first stop. I had no idea what 'take care of it,' meant in Kentucky. Did she want it or did she want an abortion?

"What does that look like to you?" I asked, trying to flush out some information.

Maria looked at me quizzically. "What does 'what' look like?" she asked.

"What does taking care of it look like?" I asked, sounding like some goddamn west coast Ted Talk.

She shrugged away the vague question. "What do I do?"

"Let's find you an... OBGYN to confirm the test," I said. "There's a woman's clinic in Lexington."

"How the fuck do I get to Lexington... Never mind, I can figure that out. I thought this body was done having kids. It's no god-damned temple, that's for sure," she said, smiling at me with wet dark eyes.

My phone rang. I let it ring while I pulled up the webpage for the women's clinic in Lexington and wrote down their number. "Can you call these people and make an appointment?" I asked.

Katie took the number, folded it and put it in her purse without looking at it. The silence between us stagnated and we both began to fidget.

After a cautious knock on the door, the receptionist popped her head in the door, "You have a call on line one."

I picked up the receiver, "Hello?"

"Hello, this is Britany with Crown Memorial services, I am returning a call from this number. The ashes you are speaking of are ready for pick up. We don't withhold ashes for failure of payment. They can be collected any time today. She will just need to sign a form... it will negatively affect her credit." I slammed the receiver down, I guess to prevent Buddy from overhearing the news his wife was pregnant.

She was sniffing and staring off into the horizon. "I guess the lord doesn't give you more than you can handle," she said then took a deep sigh. "It feels like I am cheating on Buddy. It does. I mean, he isn't even in the ground yet."

I stroked my chin and made my best compassionate face. The silence allowed her heaving sobbs to escape. Although this was not a billable service, I let her cry.

I smoked a cigarette and watched Katie get into her car. The clinic shared a strip mall with a monument company. To display their samples, they had set up a cemetery next to the parking lot. Each headstone had a generic name carved into it; John Doe, Jane Doe. I leaned on John Doe's headstone and saw Katie's car lurched into traffic as she had some sort of animated discussion with the shadow of a passenger. I considered a headstone for myself, then rejected it. I couldn't relate to someone who would want such a giant heavy thing laying on their forehead after they were dead. That seems too similar to living.

"Bro, a new client," my boss said, poking his head out of the clinic door. He was young, trained in business. He wore short T-shirts to prove he worked out. Death was far from his mind. He squinted over at his Mustang, to confirm it was still as healthy and unmarred as he, then ducked back inside. I followed him back in.

"I look for things like money for rent. There isn't any shame in getting that, it's everywhere right now," I said, describing my services to a new customer. He was my age, tanned, rough hands. Men were the hardest to break the ice with. Decades of being conditioned to never ask for, or accept help often turned their minds into lonely prisons where addictions calmed the rage and that overwhelming sense of futility. "I have clients getting months of rent paid," I said, my voice trailing off.

"I'm ok with rent," he said, staring at the wall behind me.

"Do you have a primary care doctor?" I said, looking down the list of questions I was supposed to ask.

"Yes," he said.

My boss had encouraged me to confirm the answers to every question with follow up questions. Every piece of information given by clients he called, "A lead." A lead could generate more billable hours of case management. This made finding any common ground to rationalize the initial meeting almost impossible. "Well good. Because you'd be surprised what health shit can come out of nowhere and knock you on your ass," I said, trying to be colloquial. His icy stare remained unbroken on the wall behind me.

"Can I just confirm your phone number and email," I asked. My boss insisted I do this because the medical billing software and appointment scheduling software generated invoices, sent appointment reminders and set robo calls to patients reminding them of their upcoming appointments for our brand human centered care.

The patient looked at me now. He had icy blue eyes. "Why?"

"Well," I said, faltering "often I hear of new programs for things like new phones from the government... electric bill assistance. I forward them on to my people... right now the city of Frankfort is giving out 25\$ gift certificates for free as a kind of city economic stimulus. I have been getting people hooked up with that," I said.

The man produced his own smart phone and put it on my desk. He entered his pass code and pointed to a folder on the machine. "This is how the Frankfort Police Department knows what I am doing," he said. "That file right there. They hear everything."

I considered the statement and its paranoid implications, then tried to ignore it. "Are you happy with your job?"

"Don't contact my job, sir," he said. "The Frankfort Police Department uses this file here as a portal to GPS coordinates and follows me. Do you know where I was arrested? The dumpsters at the Goodwill. Now how the fuck did they know I was at the dumpsters at the Goodwill at 5 am? This file. So don't tell me you don't know everything already." The man took his phone back and resumed staring at the wall behind me.

"Are you here as part of the court? I can confirm to the court you are enrolled in this program, if that helps..."

"Which court, Franklin, Shelby or Carrol where my kids are?" he said. "Can you fucking talk to my other case managers and all have a fucking pizza party where you talk about ways to fuck up my life more? Are we done here?"

He was right, there were so many case managers in Kentucky, if they unified and armed themselves, they could make some real noise. "Can I try to delete that file off your phone?" I asked.

"Can you do that?" he seemed interested.

"I mean, I can try," I said.

"I mean, why not, you can probably pull everything up on my phone from your computer right there," he said. He handed me the phone. I took it and tried dragging the file to trash. It didn't work. I knew nothing about phones and I resented them in my own life. Cell phones seem like fountains of useless information and illiterate people's opinions. I had seen spy movies, though. I knew a thing or two about 'burner phones.'

"What if I put the sim card in this phone," I said, pulling out a phone I had hoarded from previously working in homeless shelters over the years. "I know you already have to have a phone and you might not trust me, but It's worth a try. Sounds like you have nothing to lose."

"We could try it," he said. I fumbled with the back of the second phone with my shaky fingers, soon he became impatient and took it from me, adeptly removing the SIM card from his own phone and putting it in the new one. He plugged it into the wall and powered it up. For a few moments he flipped through the newer phone. "This will work, this will work," he said.

"I get phones donated all the time, come back next week and maybe we can swap again," I said.

He locked eyes on me and shook my hand. He wordlessly left my office while flipping through his phone. As what I did was technically illegal, I glanced over at his old phone and wondered if the Spies for HIPPA were listening to me through it via the mystery file he had complained of. I made a new paper file for the man whose name I had forgotten to ask. I wrote 'Phone Guy' at the top and put his old phone in it and put it in my file cabinet.

My next client was Ali. He had lost two feet to diabetes and his two walking canes clunked down the hallway signaling his arrival. I greeted him at my office door and motioned him in. He looked suspiciously both ways before closing my door. Once seated, Ali took a deep breath then resumed the week before's conversation.

"Like I was saying, the dude had like seven people from the block on his payroll. Once a week they all piled into his Dodge Caravan and drove to Covington. I did it once or twice, we were like folded in there. He gave us a small amount of heroin before we left for the drug screen. Some of the dudes had been up all night already. We get to the clinic and like some sort of bus driver from hell, he gives us the copay as we get out. We walk over, stand in line, piss dirty and get our prescription. We get back in the van, he's always listening to AM talk radio. We drive to the Sonic parking lot. He takes a roll of cash out of pocket, a gun from under his seat and puts it on his lap and he buys the scripts. He's cool about it, he buys what we have. Like I said, he's cool about it. Some guys give him just enough to cover the copay he fronted them. Like, they are real addicts who need the shit to live. But some guys just need the money. It was genius, really. Once the business is done, we drive back and he lets everyone out on the block. It's big business though, I mean when I think about it. Not just the mafia bringing the shit into the hood, but the dudes running scams on the side. The residential rehab clinics in their big brick buildings and you and me, man. You and me. We're all part of it. It's a legitimate percentage of the mother fucking economy."

I opened my mouth to speak, but he continued, "But my ex-wife always said, Ali, it doesn't matter if you are right about all this shit. It doesn't matter. It's not like someone is going to hear you and say, 'Hay, that guy's got it figured out! Let's stop doing this obvious dum shit! Down with dum shit! No, but it's kind of wild to just sit back and watch it all roll. I remember guys on the stoop when I was a kid and thinking those 'those old guys are just some walking dead men.' They lost the game of life. But now I'm on the stoop, watching and for once in my life I feel like I get it. I'm in the mother fucking 'cat bird seat.' See? Aint that some country shit to say? Cat bird seat? That's exactly the kind of shit I would hear old people on the stoop saying thirty years ago. But now I'm there. I'm in the cat the bird seat. You get it. You are the mother fucking mafia drug pushing cat bird seat sitting case managing mother fucker, arent you?"

"I like to think so," I said.

"I better get on out of here, I have to go tinkle for the doctor. Why does he need that? Is he some kind of piss vampire?" Ali asked.

Picturing the half empty Mtn Dew Bottles in the lab fridge again I said, "I honestly am not sure." I walked Ali to my office door, looked both ways out into the hall, then let him by.

At the clinician's meeting we didn't discuss patients, but the boss's new idea for a website.

"We put the patient's case history online, sort of like Monster.com. Employers can see how far along our people are in recovery and hire them. Then, part-in-parcel with recovery, we provide employment stabilization services. I'm going to look to roll this out with Patrick starting next month so remember this on the intake process. You do the intake, you ask, hey would you like to be a part of our program finding better jobs for people in recovery? Sort of like Monster.com? They say yes, boom! I give you twenty dollars."

"Do we give the patient twenty dollars?"

"No, you, the clinician, get the money. Think about it though. On top of the five dollars I give you for getting a positive google review, you get a few people enrolled in this new program a week... you are making good money. I mean, set goals for yourself. Make some money," the boss said. "Set goals," he repeated while peering out the window at his Mustang.

Mindlessly we adjourned the meeting and shuffled back to our offices. I stared at my stack of folders for a while. Then I remembered Katie and Budy's ashes. The absurdity of going to get him confronted me, storing him in a building with a fake cemetary out front waiting for his pregnant ex-wife to collect him seemed worse than the silent solemnity of a crematorium. I wondered too if the crematorium was hiring. Maybe I could post my resume on Monster.com; "Cynical piss vampire seeking employment in crematorium. Will work for stories."

I ran into Katie at Walmart a few months later. She told me the reason she stopped coming in was she had been arrested on an old warrant. She had also miscarried in jail while coming off drugs. "Best thing that ever happened to me," she told me in the cleaning products aisle. "It is what it is," she concluded. I wanted to ask about Buddy, but that seemed like none

of my business. She wasn't my client anymore and it wasn't my job to take care of it.

"Aujourd'hui, maman est morte."

-Albert Camus's "L'Étranger"

The Northern Kentucky Bluegrass Cincinnati Airport was as lifeless as it's elongated bureaucratic name. The underground train took me several hundred feet from security to the gates. As absurd as the short ride was, more absurd was the train running just for me. The sun wasn't up, no light streamed through the atrium on the concourse. There was nothing to see but closed fast food booths. The floor gleamed like ice, no doubt waxed many times since the beginning of the pandemic. My brother had sent word my mother was dying. Flights were cheap. I booked one. That's how I got to be staring at my reflection on the waxy concourse floor of The Northern Kentucky Bluegrass Cincinnati Airport.

In a moment of sentimentality while rushing out the door, I had grabbed *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This was an obviously problematic choice for public reading in the current climate. Sitting in line waiting for them to call my row for boarding, I dropped it.

"Now there's a classic," a fat man said.

Many years ago I had been a social butterfly on flights. Now my reclusive tendencies were amplified by the terror tube of an airplane and I spent flights staring at my knees lusting for tobacco. I had nothing to say to this man. I grimaced.

"Especially now," he continued. What the hell did that mean? Is this how books got burned? This man was bald too, I couldn't grab him by the hair and make him watch as I burnt the book. I slipped the book into my bag.

Socially distant, we boarded the plane. It was half empty. Everyone had left Cincinnati already it seemed. Bald fat literary critic sat across the aisle from me. "I remember reading that as a kid." he said, pointing at my bag like a drug dog. Had I been this annoying on flights as a social butterfly? Could I flush the book down the toilet? Would this stop him? "I love fishing," he continued. Lots of good fishing in Utah," he said.

Utah was an anomaly in his line of conversation. I think it was my cue to ask about Utah. I looked around to confirm he was talking to me. He

wasn't talking to the nearby people of color. Most of our fellow passengers were trying to go back to sleep, to hopefully awake on a different coast, the nightmare of Cincinnati behind them. I pictured the Great Salt Lake of Utah and wondered how fish could live in it. Damn it his sorcery was working on me.

"Oh yeah?" I reluctantly said.

"Yeah, we're going to Strawberry Reservoir. You heard of it?"

It sounded like a made up name. I could feel knowledge of Strawberry Reservoir's existence beginning to clutter my mind. "No," I said. I wished I could pretend to be going to sleep, but anxiety had me somewhat fetal in my seat.

"Oh, you HAVE to go. Utah. Fishing. Huckleberry Finn, you'll love it," he said with a menacing tone of eventuality. Perhaps the outcome of this conversation would dictate whether I got kidnapped and forcefully taken to Strawberry Reservoir. Why wasn't spontaneous public suicide more prevelant in society? If he said Huckleberry Finn loudly again, I could no longer be held accountable for my actions.

Thankfully the plane's engine roared as if channeling my rage. The acceleration of the plane shoved the man back into his seat. Once aloft, he produced a neck pillow. It was the same color as his face mask. He put tiny ear buds in his corpulent fetid white ears and finally put a plastic face shield on. Now looking like a motorcycle cop from the 70's he closed his eyes. It's an unspoken truth that when ever a man under 60 closes his eyes, he's thinking about sex. Silent, somehow this man became even more disgusting and annoying to me.

We approached Chicago as the sun rose. Chicago from the air looks like iron filings on a magnet. It's a powerful and important city, signified by the magnet beneath it in my simile. Prove me wrong. Landing at Midway one feels like they are crashing into a residential neighborhood until the runway magically appears at the last second. "Wow, I was all like uhh... right?" Bald Fat man was staring at me again.

As we filed out the plane he continued his interrogation, "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is good, but it's no Huckleberry Finn, don't you agree?"

I had a beer at an empty Chicago Airport bar waiting for my connection. I poked at my phone and pursued the gig opportunities in Chicago. They were endless. Nearly all my gig-economy apps optimistically hummed like hungry birds. On the TV the news showed pictures of protests in Portland. I recognized the buildings, but not the people. I continued to drink until...

...I was babbling at a stranger sitting next to me on the flight to Portland. "I was born and raised in Portland. Boy, it's changed. It's tense, man. I barely recognize it now. Now I live in Kentucky. Warm rivers. People don't judge you for... smoking or having a dog. I remember getting lectured all over Oregon for smoking and having a dog. You know, that melodramatic Californian hand flap to fan away the impossible amounts of hypothetical cigarette smoke..." I rambled. The stranger refused my airplane bottles of gin and put up with my many trips to the bathroom.

When the plane finally ejaculated us in the Portland Airport, I was drunk. Drinking some terrible beer I'd never heard of at the airport bar I checked the rideshare apps for a quote on a ride to the hospice. \$35 was too much and so I charted a course on public transportation.

The train lumbered by landmarks of my unremarkable youth. I jumped off at 82nd avenue to buy some tiny boxes of wine, perhaps to offer to my mother at her hospice bedside, mostly for me to drink on my journey. Back on the train, a few homeless people picked at their scalps in nearby seats. When I lived in Portland previously, the homeless brought a deep welling and warm feeling of duty to me. Shakily nursing my tiny box of wine on public transportation it was finally clear to me that my affection for the homeless was because I was only marginally not homeless myself. I wonder if anyone had been reticent to point that out to me back in the day. Or maybe they had and I didn't hear it. I was probably drunk and babbling to them about suicide and architecture at the time.

I hopped off the train again to check into my strange Old Town hotel. Once a flop house, new owners of the building had invested millions into the building, hired a staff of hipsters and the building was reopened as a flop house. I had a tiny room overlooking the street which was lined as far as the eye could see, with tents. I peed in the sink, left my copy of Huckleberry Finn on my bed and resumed my trek to the hospice.

A sobering walk through the suburbs at the end of the line of my third bus found me at the door of the hospice. It was a short building, cowering beneath cedar trees. A nurse interrogated me about travel and flu symptoms and recorded my responses on a piece of paper. The answer I gave to every question was remarkably a bald faced lie. I had just arrived off a plane from a Covid Hotspot and I felt like shit. But I always was leaving a hotbed of pestilence and I always felt like shit. Wasn't my interpretation of the subtlety and nuance of the questions really the important part? Our pandemic response has been largely this photocopied list of questions thus far, so our lack of pandemic response can be traced back to a democratic groundswell of carefully spoken and recorded lies. Everything has to be

somebody's fault, and there's got to be a paper trail... But these quirky thoughts didn't save me as I walked down the hall to her room.

My mother had survived Polio, cancer, heart attacks, my father's insanity, years of opiate and alcohol addiction, a career in teaching (the worst job on the planet) but this time the cancer, Covid and hopelessness were too much. I was estranged from her. She had not testified in my custody trial and losing that trial turned me into the neurotic alcoholic mess writing to you now; hell I had been the sober one in the family, student teaching, working... advocating with starry eyes at IEPs, volunteering with the crippled kids at the soup kitchen and all that shit. My ex wife at the time, doing her best impersonation of my own mother, awoke from her own drug induced stupor, rose her urine stained bed and stole my son. I guess I had put an unfair amount of blame on my mom. I realized this, looking at her now, motionless on her bed. She looked like my ex wife the night I visited her in the hospital after a cocaine overdose in 2008. Only now I was too broken to try and save anyone. Moms, ex-wives, junkies, vets or myself.

Her last words were "You don't know what the fuck your doing." The nurse came in on the hour and asked if she was experiencing pain. My brother and I said yes every time. Her breathing slowed, became labored, then stopped. Color left her face as she ceased to be holy and became an object. We both kissed her goodnight.

I spent a few hours alone in an irrigation ditch eating wild blackberries and drinking wine. My mind was as blank as death.

Actually reading the fucking book that night, Pap Finn described the horror of human ownership as the inalienable right of people, that and refusing education of any kind were what made a Man American. Pap Finn was owned by his greed, stupidity, illiteracy and alcoholism. Twain could really write an evil CIS white male because he was one. Dang. Looking out my window at the tents on the street, watching the homeless folk laugh and smoke, I remembered something that ties this stupid reminiscence together. As a teacher my mother had organized what was called The Story Book Parade. Kids dressed as their favorite characters from books. My mother was always the grand marshal, dressed as the Cat in the Hat, leading the parade in a convertible rental car, exhilarated and inebriated. One year I went as Huckleberry Finn. I had a fishing pole and a satchel in a bandana hanging at the end of a stick. I wore a straw hat and overalls. I was a hobo kid. Portland was so un-PC in 1987.

When a parent dies I hear it's natural to be flooded with regret. The hypocrisy of having not read that book before the parade mortified me. Chilled me to the bone. And the idea of packing my stupid little bag and leaving town for Kentucky made me feel all the worse for my mixed metaphors, prepetual tantrums and wasted years on this planet. And that I had somehow ended up as a citizen of Kentucky made the memory all the more weird. Of course the terrible little hotel didn't allow smoking so I went and mingled with some old friends on the street. The stars of unpublished short stories updated me on the pervert Woodstock Portland shelters had become.

"Where the fuck have you been?"

"I moved to Kentucky Like Huckleberry Finn," I said, "Cigarettes are four bucks and rent is four hundred."

"Yeah but you have to suck Mitch McConels dick."

"Yeah, I do have to suck Mitch McConel's dick," I agreed. Something about the street always sounded and felt like home.

"He was glad it was only him."

Well, motherfuckers, I ended up in Sitka Alaska, working in a homeless shelter. Half my former weight, bright yellow and writing good-bye letters to friends and son. Long maudlin story short, my wife changed after a surgery and my uncle dying sort of took the piss and vinegar out of me. I

stopped eating, and took too drinking. A medevac flight to Seattle the day after Christmas, a tube down the throat and an intestinal haircut changed my tune. The scene is the basement of a Methodist church built on the ashes of the Tlingit nation.

"So I got another rejection letter for this fucking book I am trying to write," I said to Aaron. Aaron seemed unconcerned as he braced his body against the mighty swells of an angry sea not hitting the ship we were not on.

"They said it's meaningless and has no story," I continued. "I think I need an ending to tie it together."

Aaron looked up at me with one focused eye, steadying himself by gripping the table. "What?"

He finally said in a tone dripping with symbolic importance.

"So my hope was it was to be an exploration into the feedback loop of PTSD plays on the lives of homeless people, especially Vets," I said.

"Why," he said, now focused on the wall behind me. I raised an eyebrow, considering this gesture... my mind racing to capture the gravity of this remark's metaphorical significance.

Only sober a few months, my own mood vacillated between exultation and melancholia, so much so I assumed everyone thought I was on drugs. "Well, the overrepresentation of Vets in homeless shelters across America is interesting to me... and I think it should be to others as well. I've worked in shelters in a few states and it always seems to be the same," I said, manically doodling as I spoke.

"Well," Aaron began, then a heavy silence fell over the room.

"I'd like to give voice to some of these people... bring their experience to the public eye..." I finally blurted. "I've known so many beautiful people. Beautiful people. And I am genuinely worried their lives will be forgotten if I don't publish this book," my heart was pounding and tears were welling in my eyes.

"Hmmm," Aaron said.

"I know trauma is a fucking buzz word, but curing trauma in a traumatic place must be impossible. Like performing surgery with a gun. Sort of like performing surgery with a gun," I repeated, enjoying the remark. I walked to the window of the Methodist Basement Shelter and peered out at the snow, my mind dancing over details to inspire lies and stories I could write for no one. "I'd end the book with me sober in Alaska, but that seems like a cop-out."

"Yes." He agreed, good.

The irony of my manic newly sober behavior wasn't completely lost on me. Aaron was a decade younger than me. I had paternal feelings for him as I disinfected recently disinfected surfaces, probably duplicating the actions of his own real parents as they reeled through the cycles of their own addictions... the erratic behavior that drove Aaron off to the military. Or was I overreaching as I worked the disinfecting wipe into a crack in the table I had thoroughly cleaned an hour earlier.

"Oh," Aaron said.

And like that, I was sad. I sat down. The clock ticked. We too sat in silence, staring at the tables before us. The void within meeting the dark of the night. Occasionally one of us rubbed a nostril or leaned to fart. I thought of this black hole of a book and I think It's ok if it doesn't have meaning. My life doesn't have meaning. War doesn't have meaning. What happens in shelters is probably no worse in the eyes of the Gods as what we do to the environment or what we don't do for schools and my own involvement in them was a gigantic tantrum of a child who wanted to sleep in his parents bed one last time. And now it's too late. They're dead, and I'm old. The house has been torn down. I am alone. Aaron is alone. And that sucks. And that's that...

"He was glad it was only him," Aaron said.

"Huh?" I said, eyes focused on the clock.

"That is," he paused. He took a breath and mustered the energy to finish the sentence. "That is the last sentence of the book."

"Who is he?" I asked.

Aaron turned and looked at me, both eyes focused with the extreme loving irritation of a father explaining something to a disappointing son. "It doesn't matter who *he* is. If the book is meaningless and it doesn't matter and wah wah trauma... It doesn't matter who *he* was. You write a book about the cycle of wah wah trauma and wonder who *he* is? Who cares who *he* is? He, is me or you or Dian or... fucking Barbara or fucking Samantha or... he is probably *we* but that doesn't mater. It doesn't matter. No one is going to fix this, or you or me or read your book or fucking suck your dick ever again. It doesn't matter. We did something... something like our fucking best... fuck we did something... I think. We fucked up. Alone. And walked away. So, he was glad it was only him."

-The End